

Drought-Proofing Your Landscape -By Kari Ruder, Naturewise

As I write this today, May 18th, it has not rained at my house in Cocoa in 35 days. It is so dry that it almost seems like the ground is evaporating and dust covers everything. My rain dances are not working. As I have been spending a lot of time going through my yard watering certain less drought tolerant plants, I have come up with some ideas for drought-proofing your landscape, so next during the next drought you'll spend far less time and money watering.

- Do not fertilize with nitrogen based fertilizer. Nitrogen promotes vegetative growth. If there is little to no water available to the plants to support this additional growth, then the plants will be further stressed.
- Landscape with native plants. It's amazing to me how certain natives like coral honeysuckle, blanket flower, black-eyed Susans, saw palmettos, coonties, and hollies look just as happy when it's this dry as during our summer rains.
- Mulch! Help retain moisture in the soil by mulching flower and vegetable beds, as well as containers. Mulch vegetable beds with hay, straw, leaves and other matter that can be composted right into the bed. Mulch flower beds with environmentally friendly mulches like FloriMulch, pine straw, pine bark, or eucalyptus mulch. You can mulch containers with these mulches or material like Spanish moss, stones, and more.
- Hardscape those desert-like areas. Some of us just have spots in our yard where nothing will grow or we get a lot of foot-traffic. Why not cover those areas with a patio, stone area, storage shed, lounging area, outdoor room, outdoor kitchen, etc. You can cut down on both useless watering and exposed dirt.
- Avoid installing new plants until the rains start.
- Install rain barrels and keep rain water on your property. Rain barrels and cisterns catch rain water from your roof which not only prevents stormwater runoff, but saves water for when we really need it. Use bigger and more barrels to maximize water savings. You can also keep rain water on your property but directing runoff into rain gardens or low depressions where water can accumulate, as opposed to running off into a nearby ditch, sending pollution into our waterways. Plant wet-tolerant plants like cannas, iris, sea oxeye daisy, and scarlet hibiscus around the borders and watch as summer pools arise and create important habitat for birds and amphibians.
- Minimize your use of water-needy ornamental plants. If your plant isn't providing you food, why not find a more drought tolerant alternative like one of our great Florida natives?
- Group your less drought tolerant plants (fruit trees, vegetable gardens) together and near rain barrels and other water sources. Use micro-irrigation like soaker hoses, drip lines, etc. to water without waste. Use timers to prevent overwatering.
- Hand water deeply as opposed to sprinklers that might barely scratch the surface. When the ground gets this dry, water can easily run off the surface as opposed to penetrating to the root system where it is needed. When you water deeply, you'll do it far less often. Hand water with a hose on a low flow. Watch to see if the water is just running off or penetrating into the soil. Stick your finger down into the soil to feel if it is still dry or moist. Slow water streams should eventually penetrate the soil and reach the roots. Also, water in the early morning before the sun will evaporate much of the water.
- Avoid planting in containers or pots. Not only does the soil get hotter in containers because it gets more direct sun, but there is less of it. You'll find pots dry out very quickly and the soil can get so hard that it shrinks and water runs right out the bottom. If you must plant in containers try self-contained growing systems with water reservoirs on the bottom. You will find that the plants do far better as the water is used by the plants rather than just draining out the bottom.
- Follow the "right plant right place" rule. Plant drought tolerant ground covers like dune sunflower in your full sun sandy soil spots. Plant other less hardy plants where they get morning sun but afternoon shade. Get your soils tested to make sure your plants can grow in your given soils. Experiment with new plants by only planting one or two of each kind at a time. Observe which plants work best in your yard and plant more of those.