

Surviving the drought

By Marilyn Sallee on January 15th, 2012

The extreme drought and heat of 2011 did a number on the landscape – record heat, record number of 100+ days, minimal rainwater. But native plants have good coping skills. We need to see their world through their eyes to know just how bad, or good, it was.

First, through human eyes, it was the worst and most extreme... so far. Speaking at the Wichita Falls water conference in October, 2011, KFDX Meteorologist Bryan Rupp explained that the precipitating cause, La Niña in the Pacific, is already in place again for next summer, and may extend a year or more after that. In general, the climate trend shows all areas of Texas receiving less rainfall than the historic average. So brace yourself. Whatever your area's annual rainfall average is, it will probably be much less in the near future. Time to learn how to conserve water, live with the heat and landscape for drought.



Bluebonnets in gravel (photo by Bill Hopkins).

Plant survival skills

Most people are aware of the way some plants will droop or fold their leaves in the heat of the day to conserve moisture. When that trick isn't enough, some plants actually drop their leaves and look dead, but they are just holding onto the moisture in their roots. Those black, leafless stems or even bare-branched shrubs and trees are just doing what they need to survive. Many will come back from the roots once the cooler temperatures and moisture return in the fall. Do not rip out a plant just because the top looks dead. Watch for new growth around the base of the plant this fall or next spring. They have been very stressed and will need extra care, but many may come back just fine.

Conversely, many short-lived perennials survive the extreme conditions by giving up, and putting their all into seed production. Some of those amazing bloom displays in the heat were the plant making sure its seeds had a good chance. It put all its life-energy into making flowers and seeds. It may look great, but that is its final hurrah. Save those seeds to make new plants if the parents don't leaf out in the spring.

Some native seeds actually rely on the extreme conditions to germinate their seeds. You may know that some seeds need special harsh treatment to sprout. The heat and sun pounding them all summer is another way to scarify or acid-etch to penetrate thick seed-coats or crack tough shells. From Buckeyes to Bluebonnets, watch for those slow-germinating seeds to put out new life this spring.

And then there are the true Texas-tough plants that actually do well in those extreme conditions. Many native plants, especially those from the western part of the state, saw the heat and drought as business as usual. They evolved to thrive in the extremes and have been tested through past drought cycles. Many of these plants actually preferred the drier soils and harsh conditions. These are the plants that do not do well in amended garden beds with regular watering – they can't take being treated nicely. They not only survive the heat, they actually thrive in it.

Texas is a big state with too many ecosystems to make a comprehensive, state-wide list, much less publish it here. Plants that do well in salt-marshes of Galveston may not handle the alkaline desert soils of El Paso or the acid and moisture of the Pineywoods. But you can collect the data you need for your area, create your own list of plants and share it with others in your local chapters. These are the plants we will be watching for as the best drought and heat tolerant landscape plants as the drought continues.

It's time now to start your own list of what survived and thrived in your area, and keep collecting the data through next spring, and even next year. Then share it with your local chapter. This extreme summer gave us a great opportunity to learn about the extreme survivors in our local region and make better choices for the future.