

High temperatures, no rain teach lessons

Excessively high temperatures and very little rainfall are putting landscapes at risk from the central to southern plains.

"We're getting a pretty drastic lesson in why we'd do well to plant native or other drought resistant plant materials," said Pam Paulsen, Kansas State University Research and Extension horticulturist.

"Cold hardiness isn't enough. We also need to be learning how we can get the most out of the water we have available. If we're lucky, maybe we won't have to limit our soap use, so we can recycle our bathwater outdoors on our dying plants."

During a drought, the most vulnerable plants are those that don't have a well-established, deep root system, Paulsen said. This automatically includes all recent transplants and all container plants. In fact, depending on how dry and hot

the weather is, Kansas container plants sometimes need twice-daily watering, just to survive.

"Typically we recommend watering early in the morning. That's when you're least likely to lose irrigation water to evaporation," she said. "Plus, the day's rising temperatures will help foliage dry out quickly, reducing the risk of foliar diseases."

"When plants are under severe drought stress, though, watering as soon as possible minimizes further damage - regardless of the time of day. It's a myth that water droplets on foliage will magnify the sunlight and burn plants. What is true is that puddled water where soil doesn't drain readily can heat up and 'stew' plants."

From spring into fall, plains landscapes need an average inch of moisture per week, supplied by rain-

fall and/or irrigation, Paulsen said. Some landscapes can need more - particularly where soils are sandy, plants are semi-tough non-natives, soil is bare, and/or temperatures are extremely hot. Extra watering also can be necessary in low humidity or high winds.

"Those exception also can affect how often you should water," she added.

In general, perennial plants, lawns, shrubs and trees do best if watered deeply and infrequently. On average, about once a week is often enough, except during extreme summer weather, she said.

This approach encourages plants to send roots deeper into the ground. The plants seemingly become more drought-tolerant because they can access soil moisture that's available well below the surface level.

The best timing also can have ex-

ceptions, however, and not just ones that call for watering more often.

For example, if watered deeply enough, mature, healthy trees actually go several times longer between drinks in typical Kansas summer weather, she said. Even Kansans' favorite cool-season lawn turf- tall fescue- can often survive without water for up to a month at a time. It goes dormant, so doesn't look too nice. Still, a monthly soaking typically will keep the grass plants' crown from dying.

"Other than that a 2- to 3-inch blanket of organic mulch will shade the soil surface in planting beds and around trees. This shade will help moderate the soil's temperature and reduce its moisture evaporation rate," Paulsen said.

"Rock and rubber mulches aren't as good in hot weather, because they can really warm up. They also retain

heat quite a while."

She advises homeowners to remember how time- and energy-draining yard work can be during hot, dry weather.

"You're going to more likely water as often as you should if it's easy," Paulsen said. "For example, think about strategically placing soaker hoses, sprinkler or drip irrigation systems. You could even leave them out where they're always ready to go. If they've got snap-on connection valves, you can easily use them alone or in combination. You could even link them to an automatic, programmable timer."

To prepare for future water-scarce times, she said, some possibilities are to:

1) Use free water to irrigate. Collect your roof's downspout runoff in rain barrels during the growing season.

2) Use yard slope and landscaping ideas (baffles, decorative rocks, mounds, etc.) to slow down any runoff from rain or irrigation, giving your yard more time to absorb all the moisture it can.

3) Whenever you can, apply this principle: Incorporating organic mulch improves soil's water-handling ability - no matter whether the soil is heavy clay or fast-draining sandy loam.

"Organic mulch help with number three because it decays over time. But, you can make a much bigger difference in beds you till every year, because you can incorporate small pieces of organic materials at the same time," Paulsen said. "Any fall garden debris that you can mow and catch in your grass catcher - leaves, dead annual plants, whatever - is great for that."

Longer lives do not fulfill myths about aging

Forget that over-the-hill party wares. Landmark birthdays signal a gift of time.

Our population is living longer. The average life expectancy at birth for someone born in the U.S. in 1900 was 47 years, according to 2006 data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Center for Health Statistics. In 1950, the average life expectancy reached 68 years, and, by 2006 average life expectancy had climbed to 78 years, with men averaging 75 years and women averaging almost 80 years of age.

The more that 30 years of added life expectancy at birth reflect a mix of biology and culture, but are not always perceived positively, said Debra Sellers, Kansas State Re-

search and Extension specialist on aging and adult development.

Many in our culture associate aging with losses, rather than viewing each year as an opportunity, said Sellers, who explained the importance of separating commonly perceived myths about aging from reality:

• Myth number 1: If you live long enough, you'll surely get Alzheimer's.

Sellers' response: Living longer can increase vulnerability for Alzheimer's disease, but not every older adult will end up with this diagnosis. There are other reasons that may cause a person to experience confusion or memory loss, such as poor nutrition or depression, and these may be modifiable.

The bottom line? Many people are able to enjoy their later years without signs of dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

• Myth number 2: Older adults are grouchy.

Sellers' response: Our personalities are largely established by mid-adulthood, and that means that a grouchy or otherwise disagreeable young person will likely retain that personality trait throughout his or her lifespan.

The bottom line? Growing older doesn't mean that an individual will turn into a different person.

• Myth number 3: Aging is negative, and means giving up things that you enjoy.

Sellers' response: The effects of aging can push older adults to mak-

ing choices, but making choices is part of life, at any age and the choices need not be negative.

While some choices can be related to losses due to the natural aging process, such as changes in vision, hearing or memory, many adults report balancing such losses with gains and new opportunities and report a sense of well-being in their mid-70s that is greater than a sense of well being felt at a younger age.

In reporting such findings, Sellers tells the story about Larry, whom she met a few years ago, while waiting for her husband to register at a regional auto race track in northeast Kansas.

Larry led the field in the first session, but, when Sellers asked if he

had plans to participate in other of the day's sessions, he indicated that he'd head home to Missouri, saying, "at 90, you can't quite do what you've always done."

Larry had made a choice, said Sellers, who noted that he had established his priorities, but knew when to set limits.

The bottom line? Aging is a natural life process, said Sellers, who emphasized the need to be proactive and make choices to take advantage of the gift of time.

In the U.S., in 1900 only four percent of the population reached the age of 65 or older; in 2000, 12 percent of the population was age 65 or older, and, in 2050, 21 percent of the population is expected to be age 65 or older.

As older adults, or, if you prefer, adults getting older, we're going to have a lot of company, and that's why it's important to strive for a healthy lifestyle, maintain a positive attitude and be willing to adapt to each new year, said Sellers, who noted that many people will be able to enjoy previous activities and also may develop new interests.

More information on aging well is available at K-State Research and Extension offices throughout the state and online: www.ksre.ksu.edu. To listen to an audio interview with Sellers, go to www.ksre.ksu.edu/news, and click on K-State Radio Network; choose "Streaming Archives," then "Sound Living," and scroll down to Negativity Surrounding Aging."

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