Gardening in Drought Conditions

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In New South Wales we are experiencing one of the worst droughts in history and with global warming making our weather more volatile and less predictable, these extreme weather conditions will become more common. That doesn’t mean we have to stop gardening altogether, we just need to plan our gardens to suit the climate in which we are now living.

Soil Preparation for Drought Conditions

Healthy soil means healthy plants, no matter what your conditions are like. Ensuring your soil has a mix of compost and well-rotted manure will help to retain moisture and give your plants the best chance at success – the worms will love you too!

Poor soil may need 10 kg of compost/manure mix per square metre but fertile soils may only need 3 kg per square metre.

Adding water crystals to the soil will help to pull your plants through the dryer periods. The crystals absorb (up to 400 times their weight), store then release water to the roots over time which prevents the soil from drying out. They replenish with each watering and can last several years before biodegrading harmlessly.

Planting for Dry Conditions

Choosing the right plants for the right position is complexing. Most gardeners have had their fair share of failures and sometimes it takes a few years of being at a new place to truly understand the nature of your garden.

Drawing out a plan of your garden, listing the amount of sun each position gets during the day will help in determining what plants will work where. Positions which get the hot westerly afternoon sun will need drought tolerant plants.

Australian natives are perfect for these conditions, but remember to choose the right variety for your area. Local nurseries are a good place to start, especially if there is a forestry nursery nearby. These red gums in the picture below were grown from seed collected from the base of trees in our garden.

Think about planting trees and bushes to give hot areas more shade.

Cactus and succulent gardens can be an interesting focal point for your garden and with so many varieties available, it is easy to become
a collector. Aloe Vera is known for its healing properties and is a must for any sustainable garden.

Making a greenhouse will make a big difference to your vegetable garden. Even if you use shade cloth on one side only, it will help to protect plants from the hot afternoon sun and reduce moisture evaporation. You will need cloth with 40% to 60% shade.

Preparing Established Plants for Drought

Water crystals can be added to established plants by poking vertical holes around the drip line and adding a few crystals to each hole.

Add well-rotted manure around the base of the plant, especially important for fruit and nut trees.

Put a thick layer of mulch around the base, at least an inch but more if you have it. There are many types of mulch available to buy such as sugar cane or wood chips. I have gathered the gum leaves and bark from under the gum trees or pine needles – you just have to be careful not to pick up weeds with the mulch.

How to Save Water in the Garden

Saving that precious water when the sky just won’t give you any is so important. I have had bill shock at the end of a dry summer when the water bill came in and it was several hundred dollars more than expected. Running the pump for a bore isn’t cheap either unless you have a solar pump.

Every home whether in the city or the country should have its own water tank and now they come in so many different designs that are both stylish and fit small areas. A water pump can be easily set up which will give the pressure needed to run sprinklers.

Watering at the start or end of the day is better for the plants as they get more water before it evaporates.

Have you ever forgotten when you last moved the sprinkler around? Putting your sprinklers on timers or set a timer for yourself to reduce the risk of overwatering. It is best to water lawns as early in the morning as possible and a deep watering (1 inch deep) twice a week rather than a little daily will develop a better root system and make your lawn more drought resistant.

Install a grey water system, there are natural systems available which use plants to filter the water. These enable you to reuse some of your household waste water, preventing it from uselessly going down the drain. Grey water is great for lawns, but
it can’t be used on native gardens. Only treated grey water should be used for fruit and vegetables.

Feel the leaves of your plants. If they feel cool, they should not need to be watered.

Weeds

One of the few benefits of dry weather is that it is easier to keep on top of the weeds and it presents a good chance to really get on top of any weed problem you may have. This is a good time to put down weed matting to suppress any weeds that might germinate when it does finally rain. Add a thick layer of mulch.

Gardening in the drought is possible and rewarding. With thoughtful planning and a little hard work your garden can be the envy of your neighbourhood.