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Keeping it Cool in the Garden

Heat stress not only affects people, but our plants suffer in the south Texas summers. We can take measures to reduce the environmental stress, save money, and conserve valuable water resources. Landscapes can add considerable value to homes, but only if plants are healthy.

First and foremost, use plants that are either native or well adapted to our heat and drought conditions. Purchase plants from a licensed nurseryman with experience in local conditions and knowledge of native and well adapted plants.

Group plants by their water needs. While color, mature height and width are important to the overall landscape design, the survival of plants depend on placing them in beds where all plants have similar water requirements. For example, drought tolerant shrubs, like our native Texas sage, will eventually suffer from root rot if placed in a bed with a water hungry hibiscus.

Use drip irrigation in flower beds, where possible. Drip tubing can be purchased with in-line emitters or as plain tubing where emitters are added on the top side in the location of the plants. Whichever option you choose, drip irrigation reduces evaporation of water (saving you money) and improves irrigation efficiency.

Utilize two to three inches of mulch on top of planting beds. Mulch acts like insulation does in your home and it is the best investment in reducing plant stress and saving money. Wood mulch is a good choice with most trees, shrubs and flowers, as opposed to gravel mulch that heats up in the landscape. Wood mulch breaks down and replenishes organic matter in the soil. Mulch should be applied two or three times a year. Pull the mulch away from the main trunk of trees and the stems of shrubs, allowing the plants some breathing room. Mulch is a very effective way to reduce the stress of heat on plants by regulating the temperature near root zones, suppressing weeds which compete for water, and conserving soil moisture. Regular use of mulch also provides a professional look to your planting beds, thus, improving the “curb” appeal of the landscape. Mulch is important in all planting beds and is especially helpful if you have a tropical landscapes with plants requiring more moisture.

Now that there is just a hint of cooler weather on the horizon, this is the perfect time to add compost to flower beds to replenish organic matter. You can use compost as a top dressing in flower beds. If you have mulch in place, just pull back the mulch and place a couple of inches of compost to each flower bed, spreading it across the entire flower bed. Afterward, re-apply the mulch. For more information on mulch and compost, go to aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu and click on Earth Kind. From there go to publications, where you can download fact sheets on mulch and compost.

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