

Drought spouts new opportunities

During a recent conversation, Rose Marie Nichols McGee from Nichols Garden Nursery in Albany, Oregon, expressed concern about some of her California customers and the drought conditions they have been facing.

Until she mentioned this, I had not really thought about what impact water restrictions in another state could have on our industry here in Oregon. The fact is that drought conditions outside our region can have a ripple effect, and the implications on Pacific Northwest garden centers and growers can be substantial.

I heard firsthand about what's happening in California when I received a Christmas card from some friends in Pleasanton. They said their gardening activities have been limited due to restricted water usage.

In Pleasanton, homeowners are required to use 25 percent less water than they used during the same time period last year. Homeowners are fined if they exceed their allotted amount. Since our friends desire to have a vegetable garden, they have been using buckets of gray water, saved from showering and other household sources, to water their garden.

The impact on gardening

Rose Marie's concern, coupled with the plight of our friends, got me to thinking about how water restrictions could affect the sale of products by garden centers, suppliers and growers.

Consider for a moment that some of the items gardeners normally buy — including tools to work the soil, soil amendments and fertilizer — might no longer be purchased. The list could be extended to include pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, even things like tomato cages and other plant support systems, garden stakes, twine, gloves and many other items.

A lack of water for lawns would also likely shrink the market for grass seed, sod, spreaders and mowers, trees, shrubs, annuals and perennials.

The cumulative effect of a drought in a local area completely boggles the

What I'm Hearing

Mike Darcy



mind with its far-reaching implications on gardeners and the dollars they pour into the economy.

Rose Marie thinks that when drought conditions exist, the value of food increases. So, she is compiling tips for gardeners dealing with water restrictions who may want a flower and/or vegetable garden.

For starters, if you're considering mixing vegetables and flowers in the same bed, think again. Rose Marie thinks it's better to keep them separate and to group plants together that have similar water needs. For example, many herbs from the Mediterranean region, where summers are hot and dry, should be grouped together.

Gardeners should be aware that they can have flowers, but they may need to limit themselves to those that can tolerate full sun and drier conditions, such as zinnias and echinacea. Rose



California landscapers are buying up drought-tolerant trees like Emerald Sunshine Elm.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

Marie and I concurred that it would be very important to add organic material to the soil to help retain moisture, thus requiring even less water.

A changing market for trees

I wondered what effect water restrictions might have on tree sales, so I called Nancy Buley, marketing director at J. Frank Schmidt & Son, to get her thoughts on this issue. She said the number of tree sales to California has actually increased, but the mix of trees sold is different. Buley said the California Urban Forests Council has been very proactive in educating the public about the importance of trees. They have promoted facts like:

Shelter and shade from trees will reduce the need to pay for heating and air-conditioning.

Mature shade trees can make your house 20 degrees cooler in summertime.

Dr. Greg McPherson, research forester with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station in Davis, California, is an advocate for promoting the right tree for the right location. He is currently conducting a 20-year trial of trees adapted to the Sacramento area that are heat and drought tolerant. The trees were planted on the campus of UC Davis and in several city parks in Sacramento.

One of the trees in the trial is a J. Frank Schmidt introduction, Emerald Sunshine® Elm, which Buley said has proven to be in strong demand in California. It is an easy-care tree with good disease and insect resistance, plus heat and drought tolerance.

There are other trees like Emerald Sunshine, and we are probably going to see more research done, similar to McPherson's work, in other regions.

Lawns affected the most

Lawns, however, have taken the brunt of water restrictions in drought areas. Dr. Alec Kowalewski, turfgrass specialist at OSU, said that in the Los Angeles area, homeowners were actually given cash incentives of \$1.50–\$2 for every square foot of lawn area ▶



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that they removed and replaced with drought-friendly options.

Kowalewski is currently conducting trials on grasses that are drought tolerant, and OSU is part of a national study in which 42 cultivars are being evaluated (read about his findings on Page 33). He is even conducting a "traffic trial" in which a machine simulates foot traffic to assess grasses that hold up best. The grasses being trialed are primarily fine or tall fescue, and gardeners should start seeing them in garden centers this spring.

While these fescues do not have the typical look and texture we have come to expect in a lawn, our expectations may have to change. With the research done by Kowalewski and others, I anticipate continued improvement in drought-tolerant grasses that will satisfy homeowners.

Oregon is not immune

Water restrictions are now a part of our daily life. Even those of us living in the western part of Oregon are not exempt from them. Remember several years ago when the City of Portland put restrictions on irrigation? We should not think we are immune to California's water problems.

Garden centers and growers should become more proactive, learn all they can about plants that require less water, and be able to offer this information to their customers, as well as provide water-saving tips.

Even though we have not had drought conditions like California, many Oregon cities have greatly increased the cost of water to homeowners to help pay for sewer and water services.

These high costs can be detrimental to home gardeners. It would be smart to provide them with alternatives, while assuring them that planting a vegetable or flower garden can provide benefits that more than offset the cost of the water to grow them. ☺

Mike Darcy is the host of "In the Garden with Mike Darcy," a radio program airing at 9 a.m. Saturdays on KXL 101 FM in Portland. He can be reached at itgmikedarcy@comcast.net.



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