

Meeting demand for low-water plants

BY KYM POKORNY

Often described as eyelashes, the horizontal blooms of *Bouteloua gracilis* 'Blonde Ambition' set this drought-tolerant perennial grass apart.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA



IN 2015, WHEN high temperatures and dry conditions broke records, no one could stop talking about drought. This year was different.

Winter rain was plentiful, and people had little reason to flip on the air conditioner during the mild summer. The nursery industry, which barely had time to feel the effect of last year's weather extreme, recovered nicely. And, perhaps surprisingly, few customers were asking about drought-tolerant plants.

"Everyone has a short-term memory," said Jonathan Pederson, director of business development for Monrovia Nurseries. "After a wet winter, they're saying, 'Come on, bring on the plants.'"

Chris MacLaggan, sales manager at Skagit Gardens in Mount Vernon, Washington, said people are not behaving like there's a problem unless they're in California or know someone affected by the severity of conditions there. He hasn't heard a word from his sales staff about customers requesting low-water plants.

On the retail side of the business, Lori Vollmer, co-owner of Garden Fever in Portland, said the situation is similar.

"The ongoing effects of climate change don't register with people unless I'm talking to a plant nerd who wants to grow something that's not hardy here," Vollmer said. "Even then it's more about the weather than climate. We talked last year about how it had been hotter and drier, but we didn't talk much in the long term. It's not bad enough yet. There aren't enough water restrictions."

She does get requests for drought-tolerant plants, but not because of concern about drought. Instead, customers are looking for low maintenance, which is nothing new.

"I've been in the business for 14 years and people have always asked for plants that don't take a lot of water," said Vollmer, who has stocked drought-resistant plants from the beginning. "But that translates to, 'I don't want to water a lot.' That's about low care."

There are exceptions, however, especially with Millennials.

"In the last five years or so, there's been more of a push toward low-water plants, just like organic," said Mollie Hoar, operations manager at Skagit Gardens. "But it's not because of drought; the younger generation is more concerned about the environment. They may not know as much about plants, but they definitely care about the environment."

Proactive rather than reactive

Hoar has responded to the demand for low-water plants, whether for environmental or low-care reasons, with an expand-

Exceptionally drought, heat and humidity-tolerant, *Delosperma cooperi* 'Jewel of the Desert' (below) is a good choice for mass plantings and erosion control in lean, poor soils, as well as containers or rock gardens. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA

ed palette of drought-tolerant plants like the Jewel of Desert and Wheels of Wonder lines of *Delosperma*, a small, mound-forming ice plant that blooms in a range of colors from spring to frost, loves full sun, needs little water and is hardy to Zone 5.

Skagit has also expanded its succulent list with 20 sedums and seven sempervivums on the availability list. The nursery also grows plants on the leaner side, with less water, fertilizer and chemicals, and the addition of wetting agents to soil mixtures to make them more durable in the home garden. The idea, Hoar said, is to be proactive rather than reactive to the possibility of future droughts.

Garden designer Vanessa Gardner Nagel, an admitted science geek who finds the subject of horticulture and climate fascinating, began to change her plant palette — at home and in clients' gardens — about eight years ago. In the 40-odd years she's lived in the Northwest, Nagel has seen it get drier overall, but not every year.

"The last couple of years the weather has been more extreme," she said.

Nagel, who is based in Vancouver, Washington, worries how population, not just climate, is affecting water supply. Already, aquifers are declining and signs point to that continuing. To mitigate for that, she pays attention to the landscape under her guidance, figuring out where the natural lay of the land, soil and sun exposure demands the most drought-resistant plants.

On her own piece of land, Nagel practices what she preaches. A ravine on the edge of her garden was recently cleared of blackberry and other scrubby invasives to make way for a white garden with a little charreuse for "sparkle." She opted for a combination of natives and climate-adapted plants that thrive in difficult areas of dry shade. Growing there now are white foxgloves, goatsbeard and variegated *Hakonechloa* grass. Evergreen huckleberry and ferns provide cooling green foliage and gold-and-green Camouflage™ *Fatsia* (*Fatsia japonica* 'Variegata') adds a glint of light.

Nagel doesn't usually get specific requests for low-water plants, but she

often works them into her designs, as does Lora Price, a landscape architect and designer in Portland.

In her work, Price stays close to her aesthetic of ecologically based, nature-inspired gardens, a style that lends itself to drought-tolerant plants where appropriate. Reducing lawn with durable ground covers is one strategy, as is the use of natives. Another is working with more trees and shrubs, which have deep roots to reach for moisture conserved in the soil rather than



needing a lot of supplemental irrigation.

"Different clients come from different places," Price said. "They may want to save water, but it's also that they don't want plants that are fussy or that watering is a lot of work or that it's expensive."

Both Price and Nagel do their share of educating people about the benefits of water-wise gardening. They say nurseries, especially retail operations, could be doing more.

"There are plenty of drought-tolerant plants out there," Nagel said. "I see them everywhere and growers are doing a good

job of providing them, but there's not much education."

Blooming Junction in Cornelius, Oregon, is an exception. Owner Grace Dinsdale has planted a long mixed border that gets no water. People eat it up.

"No one can believe it," she said. "They get so excited that they can have that. People are really hungry for that information and it's our responsibility to have those plants available and put out the education."

Although there's a way to go in educating the public about the importance and availability of low-water plants, Debbie Thorne, key accounts manager for Northwest Horticulture, said she sees things changing, most likely driven by the environmental expectations of up-and-coming gardeners who grew up hearing about climate change.

"The social consciousness in terms of gardening is just starting," she said. "It's like smoking used to be cool and now it's completely the opposite. I think that will happen with people becoming more responsible in their use of water."

Plants for a water-wise garden

For dry shade to part sun, Vanessa Gardner Nagel recommended *Aster divaricatus* 'Eastern Star', a deer-resistant aster with starry white flowers that bloom on dark stems in late summer to mid-fall. It attracts butterflies and grows 2 feet tall by 3 feet wide. Zones 3–8.

Nagel is also fond of *Persicaria virginiana* 'Painter's Palette'. Grown for its dramatically variegated foliage that's mid-green, splotched with creamy yellow, setting off a dark chevron in the center, it puts up airy stems of tiny red, bead-like flowers in late summer. It self-sows, but not enough to be a nuisance, and grows 18 inches tall by 2 feet wide. Zones 4–8.

Lora Price praised **sword fern** (*Polystichum munitum*), a superb native fern with leathery, glossy green fronds that grow into an arching mound 3–4 feet tall and wide. Zones 5–9.

She also recommended **Oregon grape** (*Mahonia*). The native evergreen — 



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Water-wise plants: Meeting demand for low-water plants

and Oregon's state flower — ranges from the creeping *Mahonia repens* (1 foot tall by 3 feet wide) to *Mahonia nervosa* (2 feet tall by 4 feet wide) to *Mahonia aquifolium* (5 feet or more). Cheerful yellow, upright panicles of flowers in spring are followed by dusky blue berries in fall. The shrubs attract bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators. Zones 5–9.

Bees and butterflies also flock to the blue puffs of spring flowers of **blue blossom** (*Ceanothus thyrsiflorus*). This evergreen native shrub grows about 6–10 feet tall by 6 feet wide. Zones 8–9.

For dry sun, Nagel recommended **blue grama grass** (*Bouteloua gracilis* 'Blonde Ambition'), a stunning ornamental grass with unusual long blooms that appear in mid-summer and carry as seed heads through the winter. It grows 30–36 inches high and wide. Zones 4–9.

Euphorbia characias ssp. *wulfenii* is an eye-stopping perennial with narrow, gray-blue leaves that whirl up long stems ending in huge clusters of chartreuse flowers. Blooms, which appear mid-March through April, are a bee magnet. Grows 4 feet wide and tall. Zones 7–10.

Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*) is a genus that's quickly gaining popularity because of its year-round beauty and low-care requirements. Choices range from large shrubs to ground covers, all with stunning mahogany bark. Dripping white or pink flowers break out in winter and offer nectar for overwintering hummingbirds. Various sizes and hardiness.

For dry sun to partial shade, Price picked **coastal strawberry** (*Fragaria chiloensis*), a politely energetic evergreen ground cover similar to the cultivated varieties used in edible gardens, but with less fruit, although it bears the same five-petaled, white flowers. It grows 2–8 inches tall and has variable spread. Zones 7–10.

Common snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) produces white berry-like fruits, which distinguish this deciduous native shrub rather than the unremarkable white flowers in spring. The plant is attractive to birds and bees, and grows up to 5 feet tall by 4–6 feet wide. Zones 3–8. ☺