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Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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GARDEN NOTES

WHAT TO DO FOR GARDEN'S SUMMERTIME BLUES

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Just imagine what it would be like to be a leaf in a tall tree. The temperature is over 100 degrees, and the closest drink is five stories below.

“It amazes me that plants can stay cool without a fridge, cooler and homemade ice cream,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

There are, however, some things we can do to help our plants enjoy the summer a little more and avoid any excess heat stress or damage, he says. The biggest challenge plants have is cooling themselves, which they do through transpiration.

“The roots take water up from the soil, then move it through the stems to the leaves, where it exits the plant as a vapor,” Goodspeed says. “As the water changes from a liquid to a vapor, it absorbs heat, which cools the leaf. This is the same process used by swamp coolers.”

Make sure plants have sufficient water, without giving them too much, he says. Use a long screwdriver to push into the soil right after watering. It should penetrate a good six inches in turf areas, and eight to 10 inches where shrubs, trees, flowers and the garden are planted. Perform this test regularly and let the top two to three inches of soil dry out before watering again.

Evaporation is good for cooling, but it also is the cause of much water loss when water is applied to plants and turf, Goodspeed explains. As the wind moves across the surface of the soil, it pulls water with it. It can even pull water from deep in the soil as moisture moves through the small capillaries of the soil.

Using a mulch is the best way to reduce evaporation, he says. Mulch everything possible—gardens, flowers and trees. Decorative bark, compost and even grass clippings help cover the soil to reduce water loss through evaporation.

“During July and August grass can also get very thirsty and show stress,” Goodspeed says. “The best approach for turf is to cut it a little longer, about three inches tall, and allow it to slow down and rest. I know this height is a little long for some people, but it’s still very attractive and helps the grass hold its color much better. Longer grass also provides a little shade for itself and the crown (growing point) of the plant, which needs a little protection anyway. Grass that is mowed a little taller develops deeper roots and can be mulched by leaving the

clippings on the lawn.”

Annuals are a little different than turf, he explains. Encourage annuals to grow so they completely cover the planting area, forming a living mulch to protect the soil and conserve moisture. When they start looking a little worn out and sluggish, give them a small dose of water-soluble fertilizer. This stimulates a little growth and gives them a “kick in the *bud*” to keep blooming and looking good.

Once perennials are through blooming, they should be deadheaded (remove the spent flowers), Goodspeed says. This reduces a bit of their demand for water and also cleans up the flower bed. Do not fertilize perennials when it is hot. Just keep them moist and avoid over-watering.

One other great way to keep plants happy when it is hot is to get rid of the weeds around them, he adds. The weeds compete with flowers and gardens for available water and other nutrients.

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