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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

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“Top 10 Landscape Drought Survival Strategies”

Water-restrictions from the 2007 drought are probably going to carryover into the spring and summer of 2008. There's a good chance that we may not see these restrictions completely lifted this year. Hopefully, the water restriction levels will be reduced from a total outdoor water ban back to an odd/even watering schedule. Even if this doesn't happen, there are many things you can do in your landscape now to increase drought survival. Here are the Top 10 strategies to consider using:

1. **Mulch!** If you haven't mulched your trees and shrubs yet, it's still not too late. This is probably the most important water conserving strategy to use in your landscape. Also, mulch acts as a winter blanket to protect tree roots from extreme changes in temperature. It doesn't matter what type of mulch you use (i.e. pine straw, wood chips, shredded bark, etc.), they all will reduce surface drying and soil water loss from the root zone of your plants.
2. **Plant one tree for Arbor Day.** Georgia's Arbor Day will be celebrated on February 15th this year. Even if the water restrictions are still in place this February, there's no excuse for planting at least one new tree! One tree can be easily watered and maintained with recycled “gray water” from your kitchen sink, bathtub, or shower. This may be a slight inconvenience for the first couple of months, but the dividends from having a new tree will definitely pay off in the long run. Keep a bucket handy!
3. **Prune limbs and cut down dead trees.** Many large, mature trees have unfortunately died from drought stress during the past two summers. If you're not sure whether or not a tree made it, wait until spring to check for buds breaking dormancy. If the tree doesn't produce new buds, then it's time to call a tree removal service. This is also a great time of year to do any corrective pruning and removal of dead tree limbs. You may want to hire a certified arborist to ensure proper pruning and tree maintenance techniques are used. Locate an ISA certified arborist online at isa-arbor.com.
4. **Use containerized planters and color bowls.** With water restrictions in place, the first things people usually sacrifice are mass plantings of annual flowers. However, one of the most under-utilized landscape features are containerized planters and color bowls. Buying a few nice planters to accent your doorways, porches, and patios can add that touch of color that is missing in your landscape all year round. The great thing about using containers is that they allow you to target your water use and can be easily maintained with recycled household gray water.
5. **Install hardscaping.** Maybe you've been putting off that new patio, sidewalk, rock wall or other “hardscape” feature because you haven't had time? If you're not planning to plant any annual flower beds this year, reallocate that extra time to a project on installing or renovating a hardscape feature. This is a great time of year to do these types of projects while it's cool and comfortable to do some heavy work outside.
6. **Reduce lawn area.** Lawns are the number one water user in the landscape. Consider reducing the amount of lawn area that you have by replacing it with low-maintenance landscape beds and drought tolerant plants. This is a great time of year to till under that lawn and incorporate some organic matter and limestone to prepare for spring (or next fall) planting. Don't forget to mulch these new landscape beds after you till them to reduce weeds and keep them looking sharp! Even if you can't plant them right away, you will have less lawn to mow and maintain!

7. **Control weeds.** Don't forget to manage your weed problems, especially in a drought! Weeds can become neglected and overtake your lawn and landscape areas. Many weeds are highly adapted to drought conditions and may compete with your lawn and landscape plants for water and nutrients. Many weed populations will explode when it eventually does rain and quickly choke out other desirable plants that are struggling to recover from drought stress! Call 1-800-ASK-UGA1 for recommendations on how to control difficult weeds.
8. **Watch the weather to time fertilization.** Plants and lawns still need to be fed with regular fertilizer applications, even in a drought. However, it's easy for a fertilizer application to burn plants if they don't receive enough water. You can avoid this by watching the weather to time fertilizer applications just before a storm hits. If the forecast is questionable, consider splitting your normal fertilizer application in half or use a time-release fertilizer instead. Be sure to do a soil test before you fertilize! You may need to add lime to adjust your soil pH and/or you may not need any fertilizer at all. Go to soiltest123.com for more information on soil testing.
9. **Core aerate lawns this spring.** Core aeration is extremely important for opening soil pore spaces in your lawn to reduce compaction and increase air, water, and fertilizer absorption by grass roots. The long term benefits of yearly lawn aerations include a deeper, healthier root system that will become more drought tolerant. Fescue lawns should be core aerated in early spring from March to April. Warm-season grasses such as Bermudagrass should be core aerated in early summer from May to July.
10. **Install water-smart irrigation devices.** There are many different water-smart irrigation devices that you can easily install now to prepare for the next summer drought. Stop by your local hardware store or nursery to find out more about devices such as drip irrigation, soaker hoses, rain sensors, irrigation timers, rain barrels, and other water-smart technologies!

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