Gardening Successfully in Summer-Dry Climates

Climate-driven plant choices are key to successful gardening in North America's ecologically diverse summer-dry West Coast. But first you have to understand all the nuances of what summer-dry means.

BY NORA HARLOW AND SAXON HOLT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAXON HOLT

A sinuous stairway invites exploration up and into a San Diego garden of succulents, palms, and other plants.

GARDENERS LIVING on North America's Pacific Coast from Vancouver to San Diego don't need charts, maps, or rainfall statistics to tell them that their climate is summer-dry. Our climates may be called hot- or cool-summer Mediterranean, oceanic, semi-arid, submediterranean, or West Coast maritime, but we are all summer-dry and we have much in common as gardeners.

In summer-dry climates, rainless summers are not drought: They are normal. Gardening in this climate, where water is so precious, requires a careful choice of plants that can thrive in dry summers and in that seasonal corollary, wet winters. Successful low-impact, beautiful gardens are an art form that begins with acknowledging the natural landscape that surrounds the garden and orchestrating seasonally varied plants that are climate-adapted and in harmony with their surroundings.

ACCOUNTING FOR DIFFERENCES

Regional garden styles abound, of course. Gardens reflect the convergence of the physical and the social—of the physical facts of climate, topography, and natural vegetation and the personal and collective experience of those who live and garden there. Gardens in Seattle or Vancouver are distinctly of the Pacific Northwest, for instance, and little resemble the gardens of Los Angeles. Even when we try to replicate a garden from another place, say a California garden in Portland or a Northwest garden in San Francisco, it takes on something of the local vernacular.

This is understandable because of measurable physical differences from north to south. Not just in rainfall totals but in the timing and intensity of rain. Not only summer dryness but how long it lasts and how hot and arid the soil and air. Coastal Oregon and California's Central Valley are palpably different kinds of summer-dry, not only in the number of cloudless days but in the brightness of the sun, the quality of the light, and how colors present themselves in the presence or absence of mist or fog.

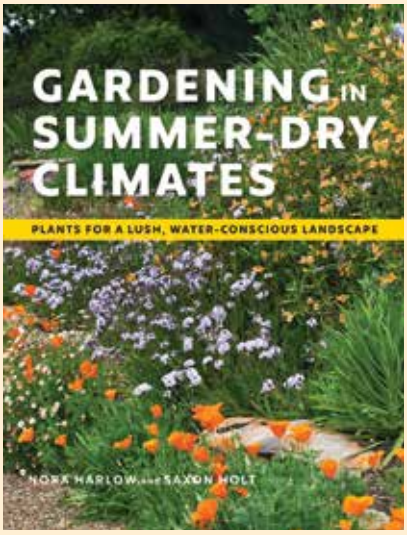
UNIFYING FACTORS

The similarities among summer-dry climates are every bit as striking as their differences. We plant mostly in fall, less often in spring as most of the world does. In summer, many of our finest perennials go from full-on floriferous to a restful dormancy. We can grow plants from just about anywhere in the world, but if those plants are accustomed to summer rainfall, we will need to water them.

With a warming climate and a growing population, our challenges are becoming increasingly alike as well. From north to south, when winter rain and snow fall short we can expect summertime restrictions on garden watering. North to south, wildfires are ever larger, more destructive, and harder to control. Invasive species and the near-catastrophic loss of natural wildlands are challenges we share with one another and with the world.

Gardeners up and down the Pacific coast also share an upbeat conviction that the way we garden can make a difference. In the face of worldwide habitat loss, species extinction, and unsustainable pressures on natural resources, we have moved decisively to reduce our impact on water supplies, to make gardens that attract and

This article is an adapted excerpt from ***Gardening in Summer-Dry Climates: Plants for a Lush, Water-Conscious Landscape*** by Nora Harlow and Saxon Holt, published by Timber Press, 2021. Used with permission of the publisher.



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Beaked yucca, left, native to southwestern Texas and northern Mexico, is quite at home with manzanita, right, and cacti in this Portland, Oregon, garden.

sustain wildlife, to use and reuse local materials, and to work with rather than fight the summer-dry climate.

VARYING DEGREES OF DRYNESS

The summer-dry garden is not necessarily a dry garden. The amount of rain it gets in winter, as well as summer heat and winter cold help to determine what plants we can successfully grow. Plants from other summer-dry climates may need occasional or even moderate watering to make it through our particular version of summer-dry, especially if winter rainfall has been less than normal. A plant can be well adapted to summer dryness in its natural setting and still need a little help from the gardener.

Gardening in harmony with the summer-dry climate begins with an understanding of where, exactly, you are. It is also useful to know something about the conditions in which the plants you select grow naturally.

GEOGRAPHIC CLUES TO SUCCESS IN PLANT SELECTION

Where a plant grows naturally is not the only or even the predominant fact that determines whether it will succeed in a particular garden. But native range or origin is a place to begin, and it is hard to believe that it is sometimes completely ignored.

Plants are advertised as "drought tolerant" or "California native" as if that alone could suggest their cultural preferences. Drought tolerant where? Native to what microclimate and soils? A plant that needs no summer water along the northern California coast may do just as well without supplemental water in Seattle. That same plant, however, may struggle in Sacramento even with regular summer water and die in Bakersfield with ample water and in shade.

Summer-dry parts of the world from which many of our garden plants derive are as varied in climate as our own. What do we learn from a label that says a plant is native to Australia? Most of Australia is

In a Mendocino, California, garden, summer morning fog obscures the ocean just beyond the gate.

arid or semiarid or rainfall is distributed throughout the year. Summer-dry, winter-wet climates occur along the southwestern coast of western Australia and in parts of its southern coast. Plants from wetter southeastern Australia may need some summer water in Los Angeles and thrive in San Francisco on their own.

South Africa is another rich source of plants grown in North America's summer-dry climates. Climates in South Africa range from arid in the northwest to year-round rainfall in the southeast, summer rainfall in the northeast, and summer-dry in the southwest. Climates of South Africa's summer-dry region, Western Cape Province, are drier moving north from the southwest corner near Cape Town and wetter moving east.

Even a plant native to the dry American Southwest may be accustomed either to little water year-round or to late-summer downpours from the North American monsoon. Parts of New Mexico, Arizona, and northern Mexico can receive half their yearly rainfall from summer monsoons, which only occasionally reach the deserts of California. Plants from many parts of the Southwest are marketed simply as drought-tolerant plants with no mention of their likely preference for a little summer water.

Rainfall is not the only variable affecting plants. The summer-dry Mediterranean region hosts an enormous variety of habitats and plant communities and is home to about 25,000 species, almost half of which are native nowhere else. The rugged and often steep terrain and the wide range of soils and rock types have resulted in many specialized environments to which plants have adapted and in which they have evolved. Plants grown in summer-dry climates along our Pacific coast come from many different parts of the region around the Mediterranean Sea.

It is clear that not all plants described as drought tolerant or Mediterranean will be content in the same conditions. In your garden, some will need some summer water and some will need a little shade. A few will accept soggy soils in winter, but many, perhaps most, will not. Some will need more winter chill or summer heat than your garden can provide. Some will do well wherever you plant them, while others may refuse to settle down no matter what spot you try.

STARTING POINTS FOR PLANT SELECTION

With so many choices and so many details to consider, how are we to know which plants we can successfully grow? For gardeners along North America's west coast, it makes sense to start with some of the many plants native to or commonly grown in our own local area or in similar parts of the floristically rich Pacific Coast region.

Manzanitas, ceanothus, coffeeberry, currants and gooseberries, mahonias, monkeyflower, mock orange, silktassel, toyon, wax myrtle, oceanspray, and elderberry are just a few of the native shrubs we share. Some of our native trees are madrone, buckeye, incense cedar, mountain mahogany, and many oaks and pines. Native perennials we have in common include penstemons, achilleas, buckwheats, milkweeds, heucheras, stonecrops, irises, dudleyas, and more.

We also grow many of the same plants native to other parts of the world and many more could be tried. You may see more conifers and maples, more heaths and heathers in Northwest gardens, and California gardens tend to have more succulents of all kinds. But many plants are grown in gardens throughout our summer-dry region: laven-

A summer-dry hillside in this Seattle garden features fragrant herbs such as rosemary, lavender, and sage, together with other sun-loving plants commonly grown in California gardens.

A walled patio garden in Los Altos, one of the San Francisco Bay Area's many microclimates, is sheltered from the ocean by the coastal mountains yet open to cooling summer breezes off the bay. Mountain flax, a strappy perennial native to New Zealand, thrives behind the bench.

ders, rosemarys, artemisias, grevilleas, rock roses, eryngiums, euphorbias, agaves, and ornamental bunchgrasses are everywhere.

Not all perform equally well everywhere, of course. Some plants that flourish in southern California won't last a full year in colder and wetter parts of the Pacific Northwest. But many plants are widely adaptable, either because the species is genetically suited to varying soils and climates or because different populations of the species have their own specialized adaptations and requirements.

Growers are constantly breeding, selecting, testing, and introducing new varieties. Often the traits selected for are purely aesthetic—larger and more colorful flowers, smaller and more compact plants, longer periods of bloom, or repeat bloom. But hardiness and disease resistance are also high on the list. Growers have long been pushing the limits—from eucalypts that thrive in Portland to crape myrtles that succeed along the foggy coast.

Even some plants from summer-rainfall climates can be grown successfully here with moderate to occasional summer water if other conditions are favorable. Camellias, from summer-rainfall southern and eastern China and Japan, are on no one's list of drought-tolerant plants. Grown in part shade and in moisture-retentive soils, however, mature camellias may be content with moderate summer water in gardens from Vancouver to Los Angeles.

CONSIDER PERSONAL PREFERENCE

Most gardeners routinely consider climate, soils, and cultural preferences in selecting plants. Other important questions are less often addressed early enough or in sufficient detail to avoid later disappointment or regret. These, too, should influence the selection of plants for our gardens.

How much water do you want to devote to the garden? How much time? Can you embrace the browns and grays of summer dormancy and, if so, where and to what extent? Are you willing to let plants assume their full height and width? Compete for space and move about the garden? If so, how much vegetative autonomy can you accept?

More sensitive questions facing gardeners today have to do with plant origins or nativity. Do you want a garden of native plants and, if so, will these be exclusively natives or natives combined with plants from other parts of the world? What does "native" mean to you? Native to your local watershed? The shaded, north-facing slopes of your watershed? Native to your county? Your state? Your ecoregion?

There are no right or wrong answers to questions such as these. Both the questions and the answers are inherently personal. Your responses will help you seek out and select plants that suit your own needs and preferences.

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