

Managing Drought in Louisiana Horticulture Crops



The Home Landscape

Keeping your plants alive during a drought can be challenging. Managing drought stress in the home landscape requires a combination of water-efficient practices, appropriate plant selection and proper care. Here are specific tips for keeping your landscape plants alive during an extended period of drought.

Water wisely

Water your plants deeply and less frequently. This practice will encourage deep root growth. Instead of shallow, frequent watering, use a soaker hose or drip irrigation system to deliver water directly to the root zone. Water in the early morning or late evening to minimize evaporation.

General watering guidelines



- **For bedding plants including annuals and perennials:** Irrigate two times per week, for the length of time it takes to get moisture 8-12 inches into the soil.
- **For shrubs:** Irrigate two times per week, for the length of time it takes to get moisture 12-18 inches into the soil.
- **For trees:** Irrigate once per week, for the length of time it takes to get moisture 18-24 inches into the soil.

Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation wherever possible to prevent excessive evaporation of irrigation water. Use multiple rows of dripline around trees, with at least 12 emitters per tree. Dripline should be placed at least 12 inches from the trunk with a second row close to the edge of the tree's leaf canopy.

Test soil moisture using the screwdriver method. You will need a screwdriver or a long, slender metal rod that is 6-12 inches long. Insert the screwdriver or rod into the soil as



Leaf litter can be utilized as a sustainable mulch option for both landscape and vegetable beds alike.
Photos by Heather Kirk-Ballard

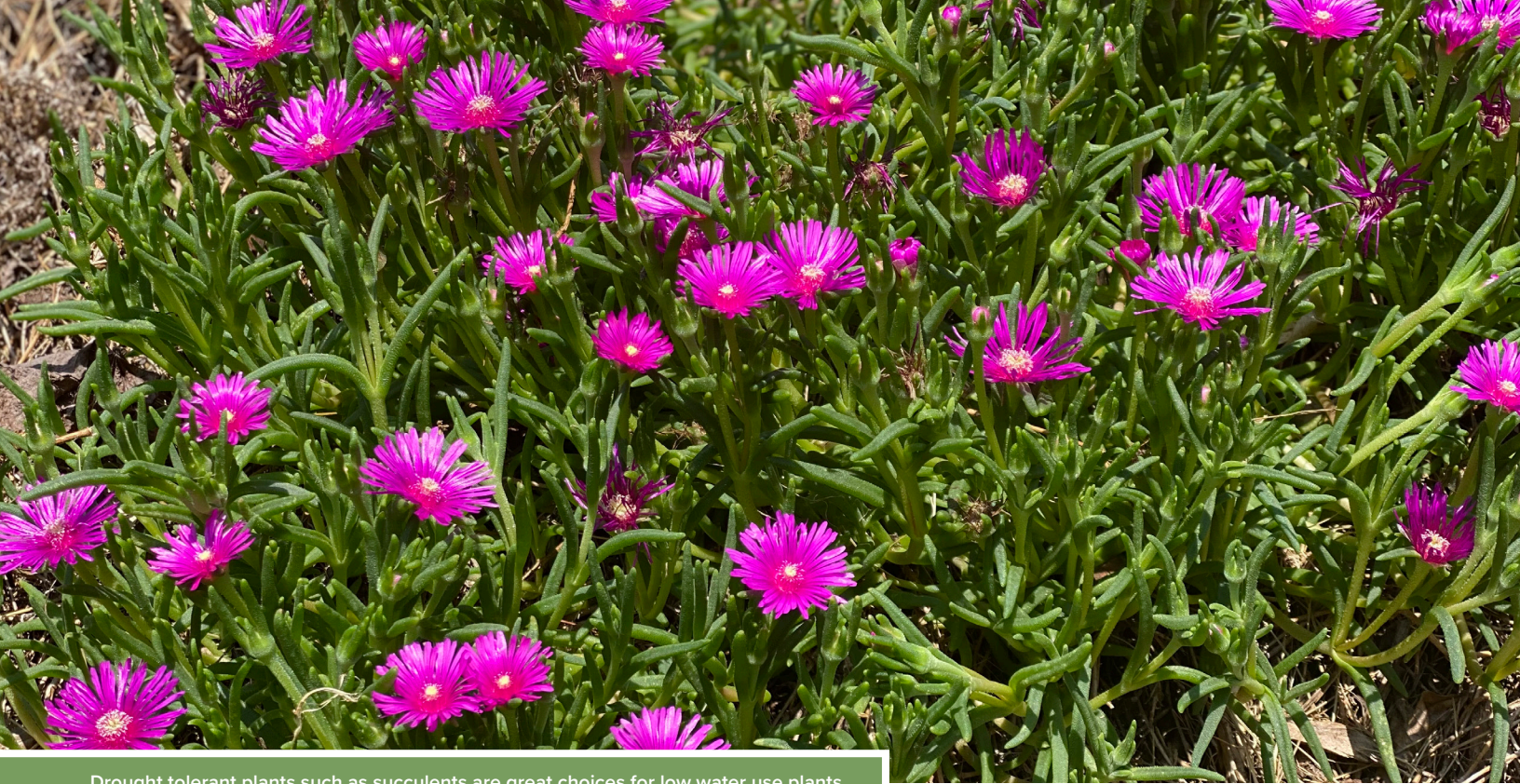
deep as you can manage and observe the resistance. Note how deep the tool goes in before encountering resistance. If the implement goes in easily without much resistance, the soil is moist. If not, you need to continue watering.

Mulch

Apply a thick layer of mulch around your plants to help retain moisture in the soil. Mulch reduces evaporation, keeps the soil cooler and suppresses weed growth. Organic mulches, such as wood chips, straw or compost, work well.

Shade

Shade cloth or temporary shade structures can help reduce water loss through evaporation and protect your plants from extreme heat. Erect temporary shade structures around heat-sensitive plants to prevent excess water evaporation from leaves. Wooden stakes placed a few inches apart on the side where sun exposure is greatest can help cool the plants and prevent heat damage. Windbreaks can also reduce water loss by preventing excessive drying of the soil and plants due to strong winds.



Drought tolerant plants such as succulents are great choices for low water use plants.

Soil preparation

Healthy soils retain moisture better. You can improve soil quality by adding organic matter to improve the water-holding capacity. This helps the soil become like a sponge, retaining moisture and making it available over time. Some great soil amendments that can improve water retention in your landscape are compost, worm castings and aged manure. When using these amendments, it's essential to follow recommended application rates.

Weed control

Keep your landscape and garden free of weeds, as they compete with your plants for water and nutrients. Removing weeds will reduce the stress on your plants.

Do

- Do note signs of stress such as browning and wilting. Water, mulch, provide shade, monitor soil moisture, control weeds, collect rainwater, make note of drought-resistant plants, group plants with similar watering needs, monitor and water when needed.

Don't

- Don't use herbicides or pesticides unnecessarily, prune heavily, fertilize or stress plants further. Do not ignore local water restrictions and do not waste water.

Remember that during a drought, it's essential to prioritize your water usage. Focus on keeping your most valuable or vulnerable plants alive and consider letting less critical areas go without watering. Regularly assess your garden's needs and adapt your watering schedule accordingly. Healthy plants have a better fighting chance of surviving droughts.

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Pub. 3892-C (online) 10/23

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