

New climate produces new American front yard

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Scientists overwhelmingly tell us that our climate is changing, and the only certainty is change. I do know one thing from my perspective: I cannot grow delphiniums any more. I used to plant the seeds in early January, grow the plants, and then have them flower the following spring with 6 to 8 feet tall spectacular spikes. However, that was prior to circa 1986.

Since the late '80s, I watched the delphiniums die in August from the excessive heat during the day and night; they never survived to flower in spring. On top of the increase in heat, drought after drought has caused me to think about the waste in water, time, and money in trying to garden. I simply can't give up gardening, but I have to reinvent my gardening style.

The traditional American front yard, at least on the East Coast, has an unobstructed view of the front of the house with abundant foundation plantings, a manicured turf and one or more shade trees.

Many of these principles are remnants of the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing in 1865. Downing was one of the first Americans to promote a national landscape aesthetic to a wide audience, and, of course, everyone

Garden Tales

wanted to keep up with their neighbors, propagating this aesthetic to a common vernacular necessity.

Thankfully, about 40 years ago, many western landscapers in the western U.S. started to challenge this aesthetic, partly prompted by scarcity of water and excessive heat. If climate is changing in Delaware, we should look to changing our landscape aesthetic too.

The only reason to maintain our traditional type of landscaping is that it is cheap to install. You may argue that it is cheaper to have a lawn than other landscaping, and I would counter that yes, it is cheaper to maintain an ugly lawn.

A verdant, green lawn requires an intense input of money and time, in addition to ecologically unfriendly pesticides. This is the reason that many Americans just give up and hire a company to do it for them. And then there are the foundation plantings that everyone has to have. In the 18th to late 19th century, our ancestors did not use foundation plantings for good reasons. I found out, much too late, that foundation plantings foster trails of subterranean termites to enter the house.

What can we do to correct what are real errors for a chang-

ing climate? I have listed some points that garden writers are promoting today.

1. Increase species diversity. In a biological sense, more different kinds of plants will be more resistant to changes; uniform turf and trees are not. Biodiversity of plants also fosters biodiversity of animals, whose habitats are rapidly disappearing.

2. Use more native species. There's a reason that plants are native to your area; they have endured centuries of your climate.

3. Create microclimates. Divide your garden into zones of microclimates. Some areas are dry, some wet, and so forth, and the plants should reflect this.

4. Know your soils. Have soil tests done around the yard to determine soil types and fertilities to minimize excessive fertilization or watering.

5. Choose plants that can tolerate drought. Group these together with others of similar needs.

6. Mulch! Mulch! Mulch! You don't necessarily have to purchase mulch. Think about how much plant material that you discard. Our landfills are filling up rapidly with so many leaves and twigs that could be quickly converted to mulch with the purchase or rental of a shredder/chipper. However, be sure to discard any diseased plant materials; mulch-

ing with them will just propagate diseases.

7. Weed to reduce competition. Weeds will literally suck up any moisture and deprive the plants that you want to grow.

8. Water deeply. If you do water, water long with a soaker, not an overhead sprinkler.

If you follow even a few of these guidelines, your front lawn

will gradually disappear. When it is close to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. (maybe cooling down to 90 degrees at night on the coastal plain of Delaware), you'll appreciate that you don't have to push that heavy lawnmower around (and pollute the atmosphere with emissions).

Maintenance of a diverse landscape, when it has to be done, can be postponed until it cools off.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.



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Gradually, bit by bit, the author removed pieces of lawn and ended up with a cottage garden entrance. Yes, it requires maintenance, but much less than a lawn requires.