

Choosing Plants for your Garden by Sue McCormick, MasterGardener

Gardening in Palo Pinto County presents quite a challenge. I was used to gardening in the metroplex where the soil and rainfall are quite different and we didn't have the added factor of deer. But I have learned what it means to garden here and what it takes to have color and variety in my landscaping. The key is choosing plants that are adapted to our area.

What are the factors to consider when choosing plants?

Temperature is the first factor. It can get cold here in the winter and extremely hot in the summer. We need plants that can withstand the heat of summer but not freeze out in the winter. On the temperature zone charts Palo Pinto County is in Zone 7b. It means our temperatures can range from 20 degrees to 110 degrees and we need plants that can stand that range of temperature. When you are purchasing plants, look at the tag on the plant to see what growing zone is recommended for that specific plant.

The second factor is how much sun does the plant need to thrive. If the plant needs full sun that means a minimum of 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight a day. Partial sun or partial shade means 4 hours of sun a day, and shade means less than 2 hours of direct sun a day. Some plants can grow in either sun or shade but most have a preference and do much better when we recognize that factor.

The third factor to consider is what kind of soil do you have. Most of the county has a rocky terrain with patches of thin, alkaline soil. This is not the area for azalas and camillias. They like the more acid soil of East Texas. If you don't know what type of soil you have, get it tested thru the Agriculture Extension Service.

One other factor to consider is how much water does the plant need - some need hardly any water and others need the roots damp most of the time. Since we are in a dry area and water is not plentiful, I want the ones that don't need much water -- ie, drought tolerant.

There are actually many plants that fit the criteria above that are drought tolerant and grow in our county. Listed below are some of my favorites:

Blackfoot Daisy: A sure winner. It is a low mounding plant that blooms Spring thru Fall and likes sun and very little water. It looks great with any perennial bush because it is low and spreading. It does best in full sun. (I dug mine up from friend's gravel driveway that was in full sun.) You also can plant it in partial shade / filtered sunlight and it is more sprawling and the blooms are not as thick.

4 Nerve Daisy: A small ground hugging plant with yellow flowers on a six to nine inch stem. Needs full sun and is a slow grower.

Engelmann Daisy: A medium size plant with showy yellow flowers that blooms Spring and Summer.

Prairie Verbena: A small, sprawling plant with purple flowers. It is beginning to bloom in the fields now and will continue in the home garden with just a little water. Blooms thru Fall.

Green Thread: A medium size plant with yellow flowers that bloom the whole growing season. It can be found growing wild in fields and grows well in the garden.

Mexican Hat: A colorful plant that is a part of the Cone family. Grows in the fields but also adapted to the garden. It has a red orange and yellow daisy type flower and blooms in May thru Fall if it gets a little water in the summer.

Zexmenia: A medium size bushy plant that blooms yellow orange flowers throughout the growing season. Prefers full sun to partial shade. A very hardy, easy to grow plant.

Mealy Blue Sage: A medium size plant that blooms beginning in late Spring until the first frost. It puts out blue spires and grows in full sun or light shade. It is a great plant to use in other combinations because of the intense blue color and upright growth. The butterflies love it.

Blue Mist: A sprawling plant that puts out many runners and grows to medium height. It puts on many little blue flowers and is a huge magnet to butterflies. It can be invasive so give it plenty of room. It thrives in partial shade but has to have a few hours of direct sun. Blooms the entire growing season.

Greggi Salvia: A real standby in the garden. This is a medium size brushy plant that is evergreen. It bloom from Spring thru Fall and comes in red, white, or red and white (commonly known as hot lips).

Copper Canyon Daisy: A large bushy plant that blooms mainly in the Fall. It is covered in yellow blooms and has an aromatic foliage which keep the deer away. This plant dies back to the ground in winter. Sometimes called a bush marigold.

Native Lantana: A very hardy plant that likes full sun and blooms all Summer and Fall. Sometimes called a calico bush because of its pink and yellow flowers. It dies back in the winter.

Caution:

Drought Tolerant doesn't mean you don't have to water the plant - it just means it doesn't need much water once it is established. In the beginning water a new plant every other day for two weeks, then every four days for two weeks, then once a week for the first growing season. After that,water when needed. Remember, not to overwater these plants once they are established.

When you consider all the growing factors above there and you have planted all the right plants for your garden - there is one other thing to take into account - deer. Personally, I don't grow flowers to feed the deer. No plant is totally deer resistant but there are some plants that are more resistant than others.

If you need further assistance called the Palo Pinto Extension Service at 940.659.1228.