

Gardening in the Heat

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<http://www.weather.com/activities/homeandgarden/garden/education/gardenawhot.html>

New arrivals to the Deep South from cooler parts of the country are truly shocked at just how hot it gets. The heat is oppressive not just during the day, but also during the sultry nights. The high temperatures and humidity can last for months testing anyone's patience and air conditioning.

Plant Care in the Heat

The summer heat is tough on plants too. To survive, choose the toughest plants for your climate, such as the Red Bird of Paradise (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), pictured above, for southern zones. Even so, plants may need some help. I've come up with some tips on keeping your garden in top shape through the summer with a minimum of time and effort, no matter what area of the country you're in.

Garden Maintenance Tips

1) Keep plants mulched. You probably already know of the many benefits of mulch. Keep the mulch replenished in the heat. Look for free sources of organic mulches in your area such as neighborhood leaves or grass clippings. Apply a thin layer of fresh clippings and let dry for a few days before adding more.

2) Keep Weeding. Here's a fast, easy way to recapture weed infested areas of your garden. Wet the soil thoroughly. Tall weeds may need to be mowed before wetting. Place a 4 sheet thick layer of newspaper over the weeds covering the entire row up around your garden plants. Wet the newspaper to hold it in place and cover with leaves or hay.

I have even come back a few weeks later and planted transplants or larger seeds like okra through holes in the newspaper. Sprinkle a handful of soil or compost over the seeds and then water. You'll be amazed how well they grow.

3) Keep Yourself Watered. Drink plenty of water when working outdoors. The hot humid weather can be dangerous if you work outdoors during midday. Use sunscreen with at least a SPF 15 rating and avoid extended time out in the sun during the heat of the day.

4) Add Manure. Vegetable gardens not in production can benefit from an addition of manure and other organic matter this month. This material will decompose rapidly and be ready for fall planting in late summer. Southern peas such as blackeye, purplehull, cream and crowders make a great, edible summer cover crop for building the soil and providing food. The pea vines can be mowed and rototilled under while still green for extra soil building benefits or allowed to produce peas and then tilled under.

Let the hot sun work for you by tilling unused areas of the garden and expose the soil to the heat. This will kill nematodes and young weeds. After a couple of weeks repeat tilling to bring more weed seeds and nematodes to the surface.

5) Water Deeply. Irrigate the soil deeply and infrequently rather than giving plants a light sprinkling each day. Apply enough water to wet a sandy soil 1 foot deep and a clay soil 6 to 8 inches deep. This requires about 1 inch of rain or sprinkler irrigation. Although drought

stress is a known danger to plants, overwatering can be equally devastating, especially when drainage is poor. Poorly drained, soggy soil conditions combined with hot weather can wipe out a plant in a matter of days.

6) Plant Vegetables. There is still time to plant heat loving vegetables such as southern pea, okra, sweet potato, amaranth, malabar spinach, and watermelon. Give them adequate water as the heat increases their water use. New seedlings are prime targets for hungry caterpillars and beetles, so keep a close eye on plants for damage.

7) Evaluate Plants. Take a stroll through the landscape late in the day. Plants looking wilted or sunburned although well watered may be in too sunny a location or receiving too much late-day sun. Make a few mental notes to move woody ornamentals and perennials such as azalea, hydrangea, ginger, and hosta in the fall.

8) Stop Pruning. Spring blooming shrubs, vines, and trees such as azalea, dogwood, redbud, spirea, forsythia, flowering quince, wisteria, and some roses shouldn't be heavily pruned unless they are dormant. Excessive pruning from midsummer into fall will reduce next year's blooms. However, trimming a gangly shoot here and there to maintain the proper shape is fine.



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