

# Landscaping for Drought Resilience

This past summer has been a wake-up call to prepare for extended droughts. Now is the time to assess your gardens while the effects are still visible.

BY CAROLYN GREEN

This summer, our brown lawns and wilting garden plants have left us wondering if this might be the “new normal”. Thanks to the climate crisis, the weather experts are telling us that we can no longer rely on the usual seasonal temperate weather patterns. There will be more unpredictable weather extremes for longer periods of time. Possibly next summer will bring an extended period of too much rain. This summer has been a wake-up call for the need to prepare for extended droughts. Now is the time to assess your gardens while the effects are still visible. I just heard a CBC radio interview explaining that drought thickens the nectar in flowers so that



Lawn areas need not be large and juniper (evergreen at the centre of the photo) is a star among drought resistant plants.  
PHOTO: CAROLYN GREEN.

monarchs and other insects have difficulty feeding. The effects on wildlife may not be as visible, but they need help and continued support in our gardens. The following five big questions offer an entry point to reflecting on some options for change in your home landscapes.

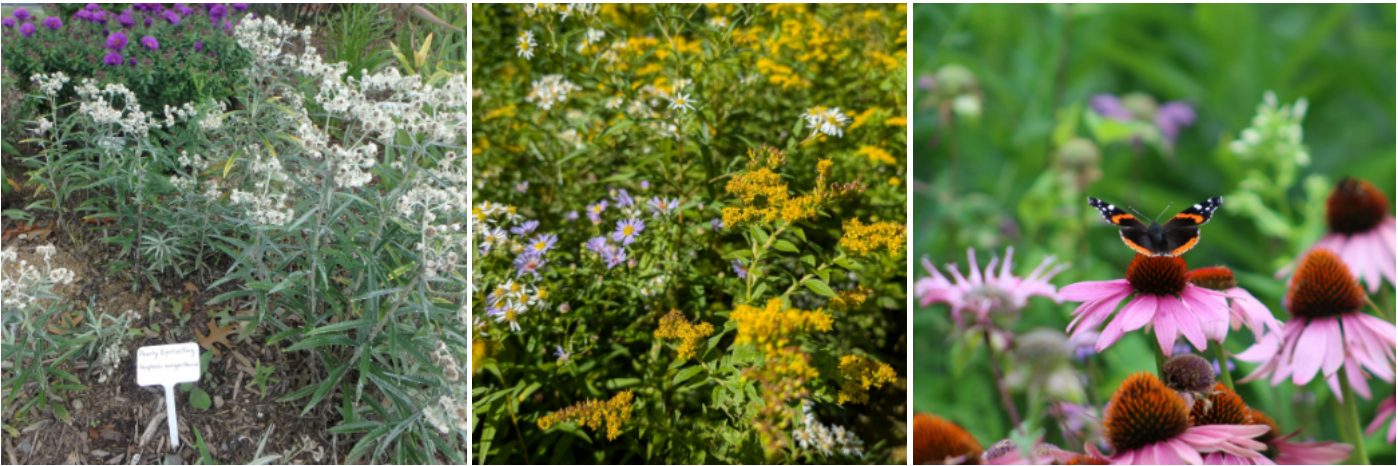
## How big are my lawn areas?

Large areas of lawn are already on my “black list” because they are pollinator deserts. A myriad of lawn-replacement suggestions can be found on the internet by searching the topic. Start by removing lawn in hard to mow or hard to water areas. Low areas can be turned into rain gardens and slopes can be covered in drought resistant ground cover plants or a rock garden.

If you prefer a low maintenance alternative, simply stop mowing some of your lawn areas. Tall grass fares better in a drought, and the area may eventually be populated with wildflowers such as goldenrods and asters—two of the best drought resistant pollinator plants. The only required maintenance for a meadow is mowing it once a year. Also, it’s best to remove invasive plants such as multiflora rose. The hole left behind can be filled with a native flowering meadow plant or a native grass such as little blue stem. Even in a smaller yard, you could allow a corner to “go wild”. The creation of these “tiny meadows” has become quite a trend.

## How much of my property is in shade?

When I assessed my yard, I first noticed that the grass in the shady areas was still green and healthy. If you don’t already have trees or shrubs shading some of your yard, adding shade plants is one of the most valuable investments for future climate resilience. Shaded areas protect soils, plants, and creatures from the sun’s drying heat. Once mature, trees help keep your home cooler. Two drought tolerant faster-



Pearly everlasting (left) and zig zag golden rod (centre) are excellent drought resistant native plants that flowered with no watering in 2025. Purple cone flowers (right) are valuable prairie plants more accustomed to severe droughts than native plants in the Maritimes. PHOTOS: CAROLYN GREEN.

growing trees are red maple and serviceberry. White oak is also a good choice. For shrubs, the star is Northern bayberry. Other good choices are inkberry, ninebark and nannyberry viburnum. A good evergreen that comes in tree or shrub forms is juniper. While you wait for the trees to grow, determine what areas are shaded by the house for part of the day. These are ideal areas for plants that thrive in dry shade. I planted a shade garden on the shady west side of my house. The following plants survived and flowered during the drought with very minimal watering: foam flower, red columbine, big leaf aster, blue violet and zig zag goldenrod.

### How did my plants do during the drought?

The corollary of the previous section on shade is that plants in sunny areas are the most vulnerable. Plants that wilted quickly and required constant watering this past summer should be removed and replaced with drought-resistant plants. The first plant to wilt in my garden, and to require extra watering, was a hydrangea, so I plan to remove this non-native plant. On the other hand, my rock garden plants have done well; the star is a creeping juniper. For a sunny border or a gravel, drought-resistant garden, native plants include butterfly milkweed, yarrow, pearly everlasting, penstemon, black-eyed susan, sneezeweed, wild bergamot, and the previously mentioned asters and goldenrods. However, given the changing climate, native plant enthusiasts need to recognize that native plants have not evolved to cope with this more extreme drought. I think we need to consider adding a

few plants acclimatized to areas with more severe drought. Besides needing less water, these might flower more reliably and provide more support for pollinators. You could add North American prairie plants such as purple coneflower and sunflower. Also recommended is blanket flower, catmints, and anise hyssop. For annuals, choose zinnias and cosmos. All of these are good pollinator plants.

### How am I managing water?

When assessing your yard for ways to reduce water usage, assess its ability to handle the other new weather extreme—short but heavy rainfalls. The obvious move is to take advantage of those times for collecting and saving water. Position rain barrels or larger containers to collect downspout water, or direct



Bird baths can be attractive features that support wildlife. PHOTO: HOWARD WILLIAMS.



Ponds and wet areas are invaluable as a place to direct water during intense storms.  
PHOTO: ALAN WARNER

The best practice is to use drip irrigation rather than a sprinkler, since the latter loses too much water to evaporation. Another trick is to water less often but more deeply so that the roots grow deep. A shallow daily watering encourages the roots to stay shallow, and your plants wilt more quickly. A timer on the water system is very useful but set it manually so that the amount is suited to the current conditions.

the water into a pond, swale or rain garden. Whether or not you collect the water, it is important to manage the excess water by having permeable surfaces in the landscape that direct the excess water into storm drains or ditches. The benefit of a permeable surface is one reason I still prefer mowed grass for my pathways.

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Other landscaping choices can lower water needs. Although mulching is mainly to deter weeds, it also helps keep the soil moist. Avoid dyed black mulch, which is more prone to spontaneous combustion. Don't forget that many native bees nest in the ground. If possible, leave a bare area of ground or build a "sandbox". Another technique is to place plants closer together and in layers, from groundcovers to medium and tall plants. This type of layering mimics how plants grow in natural settings and keeps the ground shaded. It also offers more shelter for insects. Another strategy is to group plants according to their water needs. Plants that need more moisture require less total water if watered together.

Finally, efficient methods of irrigation are vital, especially for those with a home vegetable garden.

## Does my garden support pollinators?

One of the most important but overlooked ways to help creatures through drought is to supply water. If you can't install a pond or water feature, put out a bird bath or a shallow bowl and place stones in the bottom so small creatures have a place to perch while drinking. A good source for more ideas on how to support pollinators in your garden is the Learning Centre for our Butterflyway project on the BNS website. Try to ensure that your drought-protection measures do not conflict with this pollinator support. One example is the trend of using pebbles and eliminating all plants, which creates a new type of pollinator dessert. Try to include some drought resistant flowering plants, ideally in large clumps, with at least three species in flower for each of the three seasons. The native plant police won't come after you if you add the odd non-native plant to keep feeding the pollinators!

A modern garden needs be sustainable and resilient in the face of the climate crisis. There are other weather extremes to worry about, but addressing the possibility of future droughts is one big step towards a sustainable garden.

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