GARDENING IN THE HEAT

There is no doubt about it - it's hot. With record temperatures, things have been steamy outside and all we want to do is stay inside. The bad news is that our landscapes don't know of our desires. Just because it is hot outside, doesn't mean our landscapes stop living. They still need our care. The weeds keep growing, the grass needs mowed, and the roses could use a pruning. The cure is to use some landscaping practices, which will help keep you cooler and reduce time spent in the landscape. Just follow these simple suggestions.

- Garden in the early morning. This may sound like common sense, but it can always be reiterated. Garden in the morning when temperatures are cooler. Along with this, drink plenty of water, wear sun protection, and take breaks, particularly if you start to feel over heated.

- Place the right plant in the right place. By planting plants in correct environmental conditions (sun, shade, wet, or dry), we can greatly reduce the amount of landscape maintenance. The healthier the plant, the less insects and diseases attack them, thus the less care they need. Also, place plants in the right location in the landscape. Also remember to consider the maximum height of plants when selecting a planting site, especially if you are planting them under windows. This will reduce the amount of pruning that needs to be performed in the landscape.

- Use heat-loving bedding plants. In the hot, humid summers, some bedding plants will suffer, which will cause them to be routinely replaced. Bedding plants that tolerate this extreme weather include impatiens, kalanchoe, marigolds, nicotiana, portulaca, salvia, and blue daze.

- Don't fertilize. One of the three main ingredients in most fertilizers is nitrogen. Nitrogen makes plants green, but it also makes them grow, especially the lawn. If the lawn turns an off-green, yellow color in the summer, green it up with some iron. Like nitrogen, iron also greens up plants, but does not cause them to grow. Iron will make your lawn look healthy again and it will help to keep your mowing duties to a minimum.

- Garden in the Shade. If you have a shade garden, this is the perfect place to work outside to stay a little cooler. If you don't have a shade garden, create one. Not only do shade gardens provide us with a cooler place to garden they also require less care, including less water and less fertilizer. Just remember to use shade-loving plants in your shade garden.

- Use Mulch. Mulch is a very important element in the landscape. By using an efficient amount of mulch (3-4 inches deep) in planting beds and around trees, it will reduce weed growth, prevent loss of water from the soil by evaporation, and keep the soil cool under intense sunlight and warm during cold weather. Less weeds in the landscape equals less work outside in the hot weather.

- Practice efficient irrigation. Water is a very important element for the health of plants. Some plants require more water than others. Getting the right amount of water to the plants is critical. Too much or too less can affect their health. Too much water can lead to disease problems, particularly in lawns and too little water will cause the plants to slow growth or decline. Usually the normal summer rains is enough for most plants, however, if dry periods persist, than supplemental irrigation may be necessary.

For more information on the topics mentioned or for other gardening tips, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls, Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm. Call (321) 697-3000 with your gardening questions.

Interested in learning more about gardening in Florida? The Osceola County Great Gardener program is set to begin in October. This program, conducted by University of Florida/IFAS faculty, is an eight-week course, held one night a week. Topics covered include citrus, trees, shrubs, vegetable gardening, pest control, etc. Please call (321) 697-3000 for a registration packet.