 **Landcare Broken Hill Inc**

***Greening the Hill Mk2***

ABC Radio interview No.37 – 5 February 2020

**PLANT CARE TIPS FOR HOTTER & DRIER CONDITIONS**

##### **Today I’m going to give useful advice on how to look after plants in these really hot conditions we are experiencing. In doing so I’d like to acknowledge the Australian Plant Society (formerly known SGAP - the Society for Growing Australian Plants) which in this months’ NSW e-newsletter has provided some of information which I’m passing on today. (**Rhonda Daniels is the editor of the APS e-newsletter to whom I say thanks).

With our increasingly hotter and drier conditions and water restrictions in many locations, new approaches are needed even for gardeners used to native plants. Here are some tips to consider for hotter and drier conditions in general and for more very hot days.

***General good sense tips for all gardeners include:***

* Choosing plants appropriate for the conditions, which means matching your locality’s conditions and the preferred growing conditions of plants. Landcare Broken Hill can help listeners identify the plants that will most likely survive in this region
* Grouping plants with similar preferred conditions together in the garden is good sense. Plants tend to support each other, they like to be grouped. Also grouping like with like helps with managing gardens better. So those plants that are really drought tolerant will do better together with less water than with those plants that need more water. Avoids wasting water where it is not needed.
* **Using mulch to cover the surface of the soil to retain moisture and prevent weeds**. Landcare Broken Hill is offering **FREE** mulch to its members, available for collection at the Centre for Community in Beryl Street at appointed times. Join Landcare as a member to be eligible for mulch.

#### **Tips for replacing plants**

For existing plants in gardens, our hotter and drier conditions mean that as well as the natural old age deaths of plants, some may disappear before their expected lifespan. Although it is always sad to lose a carefully chosen & nurtured plant, think of it as an opportunity to replace it with a more tolerant plant.

* Research heat and dry-tolerant genera and species. Landcare Broken Hill can provide advice.
* Be aware of the preferred conditions of the plants you choose.
* Aim for plants that thrive, not just survive, in our new climatic conditions.
* Consider the likely future climate conditions in your area, particularly when planting trees or longer lasting plants. In Broken Hill, we’re already in a semi-arid zone, so when it gets worse, it will be arid.
* Collect seed or take cuttings from favourite plants so you have a chance to grow more.
* If you do buy a new plant, ask whether the plant was propagated in local or like conditions. A frequent reason for failure of new plants in gardens is that they’ve been purchased far away and so been grown on in conditions quite dissimilar to local conditions. A fruit tree purchased in Mildura or Broken Hill and acclimatised to Mildura or Broken Hill conditions, will do a lot better to the same variety of fruit tree, bought far away, say in Gippsland in Victoria or the Hunter Valley in NSW.

#### **Tips for very hot days**

* **Prepare early for the really tough hot days**. Monitor the weather conditions: listen to the ABC’s weather forecast or read it in the BDT or download a weather app
* Cover sensitive plants to prevent leaf burn – say with shade cloth. If you don’t want to build a more permanent shade cloth canopy, then on the really hot days just drape over a temporary cover. Some people use beach umbrellas.
* Keep in mind that in the Broken Hill region it can become very hot early, so get outside well before breakfast if you know it is going to be really hot and start covering and watering before it gets hot. That might even mean watering a few days ahead of time or at least **the evening before**. As a rule, early morning and evening are the most effective times to water
* Some people prune the delicate ends off plants, reducing the necessity for drawing up moisture. I advise some caution with this tip as it is “horses for courses” – varies from plant species to plant species. Some plants do best by having a canopy shading the root zone of a plant. So seek advice.

***Watering plants***

* Water ahead of forecast hot days
* Remember that slow and steady is best as deep penetration to deeper root levels is important. So it is best to water deeply/thoroughly less frequently, than superficially more frequently. This is the key to encouraging plants to send their roots down deeper, thereby lessening shallow surface roots.
* Consider drilling down small vertical holes beside plants to insert agi-pipe – poly pipe with slots or holes – into the ground. When watering you will fill the pipes. This has the effect of taking water down to deeper levels.
* Consider setting up a dripper system (for slow & steady) as it is more targeted. The alternative of a surface spray more often than not wastes a greater amount of water as more water evaporates.
* On ferociously hot days, consider inverting plastic or glass bottles filled with water and inserting them to a shallow depth around your most precious plants. The bottle water slowly percolates down into the soil. (Its also a good example of reuse or recycling of a bottle for a good purpose).

***Lawn care***

Aim to mow your lawn as high as you can manage in summer, as the taller the lawn the more it shades the root zone of the grass. If you can see bare earth between your grass the chances are your lawn is too short and you’ll scorch the roots during the hot months. If so, it will lose moisture faster and die off.

#### **Tips for plants in pots**

Plants in pots need particular care due to their smaller amount of soil and ability to dry out faster.

* Avoid black plastic pots. Even sitting a black pot in another larger lighter colour pot can help.
* Use waterwell pots to allow plants to draw on moisture as they need it. (These pots are a type of wick gardening, drawing water up from a small reservoir below).
* Cover the soil surface with mulch.
* Use bigger pots.
* Soak pots in a bucket of water and let them drain to fully soak them.
* Put an inverted bottle filled with water into each plant pot so that the water percolates.
* Move pots to a shadier, sheltered position, on a day forecast to be particularly hot and/or windy.

#### **Is it really dead?**

Don’t be too quick to write-off a plant after a bout of hot weather. The plant may look unhappy, but could recover from wilted or dead leaves. Even with dead leaves, the plant may still be alive.

Prune off affected foliage then water well and wait to see what happens. Research if the plant has a lignotuber, epicormic buds or other ways to recover from leaf damage. For larger plants with a trunk, scrape away a small piece of bark to see if the plant is alive.

#### **Thriving not just surviving**

As said above, get to know your locally hardy plants, so that you grow only those plants that will thrive in this region, rather than just survive. Here’s an example:

The Australian Plants Society points out that there is a good example of native plants which have similar attractive tube-like flowers (both loved by bees for their nectar but with different hardiness characteristics. Eremophilas (which grow in the Broken Hill region are known for their hardiness and so can thrive, whereas correas which are not too dissimilar in appearance (and are often sold in nurseries), are not so hardy. Maria Hitchcock, the holder of the National Correa Collection in Armidale NSW, wrote in the December 2019 Correa Study Group newsletter that correas are generally thought to be drought-hardy plants and until the current drought she had rarely had to water her well-mulched gardens. However, the current conditions have proven disastrous for many recent and even well-established correa plants. Maria’s collection is now being held in pots until the drought ends.

***Climate change may lead to a rethink on how we garden, possibly moving towards more deep-rooted trees rather than shallow-rooted shrubs such as correas.***

In short, the old ways may no longer be the best ways to ensure your garden survives into the future.

**The ABC’ magazine Gardening Australia February 2020 issue has many ideas to help care for plants in hot & dry conditions.**

**Landcare Broken Hill would love to hear from Broken Hill citizens who have hot weather survival tips or success stories with gardening in this district – email or write – and we will spread the word.**

**The next public meeting of Landcare Broken Hill will be on Thursday 27 February**

**At the CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY, 200 Beryl St, Broken Hill**

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