

The Skinny on Summer Gardening

Written by Alice Massey

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Maybe this should have been called the sticky on summer gardening. It is steamy out there and if you dally too long it can be downright uncomfortable. No one wants to be pulling weeds when the beach is calling or a cool paddle through the marshes has a much better ring to it.

This is the time of year when the chores are fewer and can be accomplished early in the day before the sun is high. A lot can be done while strolling around the garden with a cup of coffee in one hand and a pair of clippers in the other. A light shearing with a snip here and there and some deadheading of spent flowers will help your perennials keep their shape and they will look better and reward you with increased flowering later. The mophead hydrangeas are still in full bloom and this is a good time to enjoy them in the house as cut flowers. As soon as they finish blooming I'll quickly clip off any remaining spent flowers so the new growth can harden in anticipation of next year's blooms.

Insects seem to thrive on unpleasantly hot weather but chemical control should always be a last resort. A good spray of water from your hose can often dislodge and discourage them. If it has not rained for several days leaves can get dusty and in addition to clogging the pores in leaves, dust is the perfect environment for insects, so that shower from your hose is doing double duty. Besides, it feels so good when the water splashes on you.

Many birds like wrens, warblers and chickadees love insects and a thriving bird population will naturally keep the numbers of insects in check. Keep your birdbath filled as fresh water will attract birds to your garden, fresh water along with food will keep them there.

I saw my first and only, so far, Monarch butterfly recently. It was laying eggs on a Butterfly Weed, the variety I grow is called *Asclepias curassavica* and I have it in different colors of

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yellow, and a mix of yellow and orange. The eggs disappeared and there were lots of chewed leaves on the plants so I am hoping the eggs hatched and it was the Monarch caterpillar that was munching on the leaves.

Watering your garden during the summer is a top priority but be sure to follow the rule of watering deeply once weekly rather than several short bursts. You want to put down at least 1" of water at one time, generally just once a week. This encourages roots to grow deep into the cooler soil resulting in healthier plants. Short bursts are a pretty much a waste of water and money as they encourage shallow roots. Shallow rooted plants and turf grass are far more susceptible to insect infestations and diseases, particularly fungal problems.

While water is necessary too much is not a good thing. Too many sprinklers are running in the rain. Remember to check to make sure your rain sensor is working. They are easily damaged and often may need to be replaced. I just looked to see what one costs and I found one locally for \$18. They are easily installed and the payback could be in less than one month. Not only are the savings monetary but you are saving our marshes from unnecessary stormwater runoff.

If you still need a play in the dirt gardening fix during the summer consider containers. Containers are fun. Consider them mini gardens and they can be put together while you are sitting under a shady tree or umbrella with a glass of tea nearby. By using a good quality potting mix you are providing the ideal growing conditions. You can add some slow release fertilizer and as long as the appropriate water needs are met you can have instant horticultural gratification. No matter what your gardening experience, containers can make you look pretty savvy.

If you are going to do some mini landscaping and mix plants in a container, be sure to note the growing requirements and match them carefully. Shade plants with shade plants, for example. There is an oft written rule that you should have a thriller, a spiller and a filler in a mixed container but, hey, this is your little garden pot, do whatever makes you smile. A massed pot of one type of blooming plant can be just as striking as a mixed pot. Put plants and pots together in the nursery and see what pleases you. Do read the labels carefully and note the growing habits.

Containers allow you to try plants you are thinking of using in your garden. This is an easy and inexpensive way to give them a test run. That landscape design you thought you liked may not work out after all. Or, it may be spectacular and you know you are on the right track.

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Another favorite summer gardening activity is my water garden. Nothing fancy here, just a large container with several water lilies. No fountains or waterfalls, just beautiful flowers. A few inexpensive goldfish take care of any mosquito larvae. Just watching this container is relaxing on a hot day.

So, when the air is so thick and you feel sticky just thinking about going outside, don't fret. Your plants need a breather also, and they will appreciate not being pushed to grow right now. I am enjoying just sitting on the deck watching the birds and butterflies; that's enough gardening for me this week. During the hottest part of the day you will find me enjoying a good gardening book; right now I am re-reading Elizabeth Lawrence's "A Southern Garden," a must read for any southern gardeners.