

Succeeding During Drought

By Suzie Wiest, Marketing Rep., Village Nurseries Wholesale LLC, Orange, Calif.



The Euphorbia tirucalli 'Firestick' has striking colorings of pink, red, purple, yellow and green. It is drought tolerant and easy to grow. A general warning about the Firestick is the sap within its stems can irritate the skin, and certainly you wouldn't want to get it in your eyes. The succulent is native to Madagascar, tropical and subtropical Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and India.

Photo Stephen Kelly

Forecasters predict 2014 will be the third consecutive drought year in California and the Southwest. In response, authorities have called upon landscape contractors, landscape architects and designers to use more drought-tolerant plantings for their projects.

Some clients associate drought-tolerant plantings with xeriscaping, a stark appearance more reminiscent of parched desert than the lush landscape some clients may envision. With this mind set, it's no wonder those clients would tend to resist water-wise plantings.



***Mahonia* 'Soft Caress'** is a good drought-tolerant shrub for shady areas. It has soft leaves and no spines, with golden yellow candle-like blooms from mid-fall through winter. Similar to *Nandina*, it grows from the bottom, making it full at the base. It was chosen "2013 Plant of the Year" at the Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show in London.

A Whole New Palette

Over the past quarter-century, top plant breeders—Monrovia Growers, Anthony Tesselaar,

PlantHaven and Plant Development Services— have introduced proprietary and patented drought-tolerant plantings that also have other desirable qualities: longer blooming season, disease and pest resistance, vibrant and interesting foliage, bright colors, hardiness and reduced maintenance.

As a result, landscape architects and contractors can create new and dramatic landscapes that set them apart from the competition, and pleasing clients, whether they be residential customers or city authorities.

In the past decade alone, there has been the introduction of more grasses, natives and succulents. “Cool” newcomers include *Anigozanthos* (Australian plants in the Bloodwort family); *Calandrinia* (purslane species); *Carex* (sedges); *Echeveria* (attractive, flowering succulents); *Grevillea* (evergreen flowering plants in the protea family); and *Leucadendron* (South African plants in the Proteaceae family).

Top-performing new varieties of drought-tolerant plants include:

Agave attenuata ‘Blue Flame’
Aloe striata ‘Blue Elf’
Cistus ‘Little Miss Sunshine’ *Cistus*
Ceanothus ‘Diamond Heights’
‘Blush Pink’, ‘Obsession’ and ‘Flirt’ *Nandina*
Hesperaloe parviflora (red yucca)
Senecio mandraliscae
Dasyliirion longissimum (Mexican Grass Tree)



Among the top-performing new varieties of drought-tolerant plants is 'Blush Pink' Nandina (top). 'Blush Pink' is a new variety of Nandina 'Firepower,' a noninvasive selection of the invasive ornamental Nandina domestica ('heavenly' bamboo), according to the University of Florida IFAS Extension. The leaves are light to medium green with pink new growth during summer and a purplish-pink to red during fall and winter.

Drought-Tolerant Shade Plants

Landscape architects and designers often look for interesting alternatives for the shade. Two excellent choices are 'Soft Caress' Mahonia and 'Silver Shadow' Astelia.

Mahonia 'Soft Caress' is a 3' x 3' shrub with an interesting texture and golden yellow candle-like blooms from mid-fall through winter. Similar to Nandina, it grows from the bottom, ensuring it will always stay full at the base. It was chosen "2013 Plant of the Year" at the Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show in London.

Astelia 'Silver Shadow' is a clumping perennial with bold, strappy silver leaves that adds height

to any garden and loves the shade. It's so drought-tolerant it's like an air plant, an excellent contrast when paired with darker leafed Phormium, Loropetalum or other succulents.

Learning to grow new draught-tolerant plants

Many drought-tolerant plants require a period of regular watering to establish the roots. "Drought-tolerant once established" is commonly seen on the labels of these plants. As part of regular maintenance, it's important that the infrequent watering be deep to force the roots down into the lower soil levels that readily contain more moisture.

Applying mulch is another helpful water conservation practice because it greatly reduces the amount of water that evaporates, and keeps the soil cooler during the warmer months. Mulch also improves the quality of soils by breaking up clay and allowing water and air movement through. Sandy soils benefit because mulch provides nutrients and improves the soil's moisture-holding capacity. Mulch also helps prevent weed growth.

Water Conservation Resources

There are some excellent resources available to assist landscape professionals in water conservation efforts:

[The Water Conservation Garden](#) in El Cajon, Calif., has excellent exhibits and programs.

[The University of California Cooperative Extension](#) has just released the new 2014 Water Use Classification of Landscape Species list, or WUCOLS IV.

A Great Opportunity

The current drought conditions offer landscape architects and designers the opportunity to burnish their "green" credentials and assume a leading role in developing sustainable landscapes that hold soil and water, conserve energy, offer an exciting diversity and endure over the long term. In so doing, they help reduce the destructive impact of climate change, air and water pollution, drought and water shortages. Not a bad trade-off.