Drought-tolerant plants keep landscape looking good

If there’s one thing Oklahoma gardeners know about, it is keeping plants alive and thriving through the hottest, driest part of the summer. When the state experiences drought conditions, it can be hard to keep plants healthy and the landscape looking good.

One gardening method that will help starts long before the drought hits – it starts with plant selection. Choosing drought-tolerant plants will help ensure the landscape looks its best throughout the season. With high temperatures, unpredictable climate changes and rising energy costs, it makes sense to install plantings that are low maintenance.

So, what does drought-tolerant actually mean? Drought-tolerant plants are those with built-in features to help minimize water loss and maximize water uptake. Some plants may have reduced leaf areas and bear small leaves or needles. Some plants have larger leaves with deep indentions between lobes in the leaves to reduce leaf area.

Another indicator is leaves covered with an accumulation of wax. This covering helps conserve water within the plant. Some varieties of plants feature fine hairs on the leaves that helps trap moisture at the leaf surface.

Other drought-tolerant plants have a deep root system that pulls moisture from well below the soil surface.

Keep in mind that just because a plant is identified as drought tolerant doesn’t mean it doesn’t need water. During the first year in the landscape, trees, shrubs and flowers will need regular watering in order to develop a healthy root system.

It’s a good idea to group your drought-tolerant plants together so they don’t get overwatered. Plants with higher irrigation requirements should be planted separately to make watering easier.

Most drought-tolerant plants need good drainage. If over-watered or planted in tight soils with poor draining, the roots will rot and the plant will die.

What should Oklahoma gardeners plant in their gardens? Some drought-tolerant perennials to consider include hardy plumbago, Shasta daily, coneflower, daylily, rosemary, autumn sage and verbena, to name a few. Some annual selections include cockscomb, firebush, cosmos, sunflower, lantana, marigolds, amaranth, Mexican bush sage and zinnia.

Some great choices for drought tolerant groundcovers include junipers, monkey grass and creeping phlox. Climbers include Boston ivy, English ivy, climbing roses, crossvine, trumpet vine and Virginia creeper. Zebra grass, muhly grass, switch grass, maiden grass and pampas grass are excellent drought-tolerant grasses.