



Native Trees and Shrubs Reduce Summer Water Use

By Ryan Durocher

When selecting trees and shrubs for your home landscape, the absolute best way to ensure that your selections won't be summertime water guzzlers is to choose native trees and shrubs. Native, or indigenous, plants are those species that existed locally before the arrival of European settlers. Since these plants thrived in the local environment long before the arrival of garden hose and sprinkler systems, they are eminently suited to the local climate.

Our climate here in the Pacific Northwest is fairly extreme—we generally have extremely moist winters followed by extremely dry summers. Thus our native plants are mostly drought tolerant. And that drought tolerance will translate into low water usage in your home landscape.

However, the Pacific Northwest is by no means ecologically homogenous. Differences in soil, hydrology, topography, altitude, microclimate and other site characteristics determine which plants will thrive on that site and which will not be able to compete. For example, Pacific madrone can often be found on exposed bluffs in shallow well-drained soil while a vine maple would wither and die on such a harsh dry site. If low water usage is your goal, select trees and shrubs naturally found in upland, rocky, sandy or otherwise dry environments rather than those found in wetlands or riparian areas.



When selecting species for your home landscape, keep in mind that your backyard is a disturbed environment, not a pristine ecosystem, and may not support some of the more finicky native trees and shrubs. It also helps to have a decent idea of what type of soil you have to work with (i.e. sandy, loamy or clayey) and whether the location receives full sun, part sun, or full shade. Drought tolerant plants will still need water for the first one or two summers to get established; once established, they'll do just fine with total neglect.

Excellent tree choices for water conservation are cascara, Pacific madrone, Oregon white oak, ponderosa pine, black hawthorn and Douglas-fir. Drought tolerant native shrubs include western serviceberry, tall Oregon-grape, oceanspray, red-flowering currant, snowberry, mockorange, and hairy manzanita. The book *Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest* by Arthur Kruckeberg is an indispensable resource for individuals interested in creating a nativescape, or native landscape. Your local native nursery will also help you

The Regional Water Providers Consortium is not responsible for the content in this article. Information in the article is provided by the author. Photo courtesy of Duane Karstens.

choose the right native plant for your soil and sun exposure conditions. Local stormwater agencies and water conservation districts often have information regarding water-wise landscaping practices.

Besides contributing to low water usage, native trees and shrubs have many other environmental benefits. They require no fertilizer or pesticides to maintain. They provide food and habitat for native birds, insects, and small mammals. Oh, and did I mention that they can be quite beautiful?

About the Author

Ryan Durocher is the Natural Area Restoration Specialist at Friends of Trees, a Portland-based non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring community stewardship of the urban forest by bringing people in the Portland-Vancouver area together to plant, care for, and learn about city trees. He is originally from Detroit, Michigan, and received his degree in Resource and Ecology Management from the University of Michigan. When not leading volunteers in community-based watershed restoration projects, he enjoys cycling, kayaking, hiking, and otherwise exploring this beautiful place called the Pacific Northwest. For more information please visit www.friendsoftrees.org.