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Native plants draw on moisture far below the surface, allowing them to survive harsh conditions.

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LINCOLN — Roots of native perennials and grasses run deep — in feet, not inches.

That's why Benjamin Vogt's backyard garden fared better than those of many neighbors.

He wasn't trying to outdo anyone in his Pioneers Park neighborhood when he planted native grasses and ornamentals five years ago. He just wanted a garden that would attract insects, butterflies and birds.

It did. And by late this season, his garden was blooming with flowers when others had long ago given up. His garden also was amazingly green even though he watered it only three times all summer.

The garden was a tribute to Vogt's research on plants that are well-adapted to weather extremes in the Midlands.

This year, the driest and third warmest summer on record tested gardens. Those with mostly native plants survived, drawing from deep-in-the-ground reserves of moisture. Many native grasses have roots that extend many times deeper than the above-ground plants would suggest.

In Lincoln, watering restrictions might have flummoxed some gardeners, but for Vogt, watering wasn't an issue. In addition to sparingly watering the garden, he also let his lawn go dormant. By late August in his backyard, sunflowers, goldenrod, asters and large sedums were in bloom. Native grasses, such as little bluestem, had put up distinctive turkey-foot seed heads.

Vogt said he thought the garden looked a little sad. But it was alive. And if there's a lesson he would take from the harsh summer, it would be to plant even more natives.

Care and feeding

Landscaping: Ornamental grasses and native perennials can be used in formal or naturalized settings.
Their uses are varied, as screens, backdrops, in dramatic masses, groundcovers and borders. They're a textural break from more formal plantings and provide sound effects as they rustle in the wind.
Planting: Eliminate competition from perennial and annual weeds. Improve the soil by deeply incorporating organic matter.
Watering: Native perennials have extensive root systems. They need supplemental watering only until their roots take hold. Many won't grow well if over-watered.
Managing: Most grasses, but not all, require full sun. Some can withstand poor soil. Most are drought-tolerant. Leaving the foliage on through the winter helps protect the root crown from drying out and provides wildlife protection. When stems fall over, it's best to remove them, both for looks and for protection of the plant from small animals.
Cutting back: Grasses should be cut down before new growth emerges in the spring. Depending on snow cover and other variables, this may mean cutting back grasses in February or March in a warm winter and early spring or as late as May in a cold winter with deep snow. Clip low and close to the ground using a hand-clipper, weed whip or other tools.
Fertilizing: Test soil before planting. If the soil needs nutrients, work them into the root zone before planting. Fertilize ornamental grasses only when the leaf color is off-green, a sign of poor fertility, and other causes of poor growth have been eliminated.

Source: Ornamental Grasses for Nebraska Landscapes, NebGuide G1691, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

That's what people have been buying at the weekend plant sales put on by the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, said Justin Evertson, the arboretum's interim director.

"This is a good time, through late October, to plant native grasses," he said.

Among the most popular and least overwhelming in the landscape are prairie dropseed, sideoats grama, switchgrass, little bluestem and, in more central and western parts of Nebraska, buffalograss.

Evertson noted that prairie dropseed is a little slower to get established and, in eastern Nebraska, buffalograss gets an extra layer of competition from plants like dandelions as the grass is getting established. Buffalograss is a little weedy and a more drab green color than bluegrass, but its roots will carry it through a drought.

The natives have no significant diseases and will survive fire and even wallowing buffaloes (if that's a problem where you live).

If they have a drawback when used in city landscapes, it's that too much water can weaken them, even after they are established. That's why they're so perfect when cities issue watering restrictions and why homeowners must be careful not to overwater. The plants probably get sufficient moisture from water that happens to come their way if you water roses or other plants.

In all, Vogt had few losses. Except for the healthy native grasses, Anne and Lynn Senkbeil, also of Lincoln, had some disappointments, especially in their pots and assorted containers.

"It wasn't a good year to be out there, for people, too," Anne said of her yard near the Lincoln Country Club.

"A lot of things didn't make it, the non-natives, the things in pots. None of that made it."

Lucky for them, it was a good year for spring-blooming plants and their native grasses — big and little bluestem and pampas grass. The Senkbeils use these grasses as contrast to flowers and as borders and backgrounds.

Brian Herting of Lincoln also had success with grasses, and they took much less attention than his evergreens and conifers. He lost about eight of those this summer.

Herting's grasses are hardy, widely available and popular, including the "Karl Foerster" feather-reedgrass, a knee-high plant until it blooms in early summer. Its seed heads stand erect through two or three seasons in borders or as backgrounds in many commercial and home landscapes.

Herting's grass collection also includes "Bunny Tails," little bluestem, maidengrass and purple lovegrass.

"I didn't water these much. And if I'd never watered those, they would have been fine. They just never showed stress. You water to your weakest link."

At the Fine Gardening website, Vogt described his garden as 75 percent native perennials, shrubs and trees.

He did "copious amounts of research so the right plant goes in the right place. The plants then need me hardly at all."

Vogt, a 36-year-old published poet ("Afterimage: Poems" and "Sleep, Creep, Leap: The First Three Years of a Nebraska Garden"), teaches in the English department at Doane College in Crete, Neb., and last year started Monarch Gardens, a garden coaching and consulting business.

Also last year, Lincoln's Wachiska Audubon Society invited Vogt to participate in its annual garden tour. He was on hand to answer questions and estimated that 500 people came through the garden gate.

Fine Gardening magazine featured Vogt's garden earlier this year, showing it in all four seasons. At this time of year, a winding path in his garden is narrow with over-arching branches. Weeds don't have room to settle in here.

Vogt said when he started the garden five years ago, he bought plants and "packed them in thickly."

That's how to keep the weeds down, he said. And that's how prairie plants like it.

When the garden is finished for the season, he will leave it to shelter birds and insects and clean it up in late winter. Depending on the weather, that may be February or March.

"I cut down everything by hand, using the waste as mulch, and use the hollow-stemmed plants to create bee bundles to hang on the fence. I raise, on average, 200 monarch butterflies each year. I garden for insects. The garden attracts twice as many insects each year, seriously, and more and more birds feeding on them. I use no chemicals, and predatory insects often take care of the bad ones within days."

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