

Saving drought damaged dogwoods

[Stan Rosenthal*

Sunday, April 27, 2003

The lack of rain over the last few years has been rough on many of our trees. One of the worst hit by the drought has been our dogwoods.

Our area is toward the southern end of the eastern dogwood's natural range. So hot, dry weather can be very stressful for them. When the trees became stressed many opportunistic insects and diseases were able to move in to take advantage of the weakened trees. Many times our dogwoods were killed by this combination of drought, insects and diseases.

I know because our office got a lot of calls from people asking what could be done to save their dogwoods. Our answer was to suggest creating the best growing environment for them. How? Provide good mulch beds under them. Plant dogwoods where they get some shade during the day, especially the hot west sun and water them during dry times. Sadly, sometimes we had to say there may be nothing else that can be done to save an old and stressed dogwood.

Fortunately, rains are returning to more normal patterns. I hope this continues.

Unfortunately, over this drought we lost many of our dogwoods. I recommend we begin to plan to replace them now that the rains are back. During winter when the trees are dormant is the best time to plant them, but - provided careful attention is given to watering - container-grown trees can still be planted now.

Look for a spot where a smaller tree will do. You should have a good mulch bed underneath and partial shade. Dogwood roots are very sensitive to heat so mulch helps keep the soil cooler. The mulch bed should be as large as the crown spread of the tree and should be 2 to 4 inches deep. The leaves of dogwoods decompose more quickly than most leaves and are rich in nutrients such as calcium, so don't waste these rich soil-building leaves by making sure the leaves stay under the tree.

The fruit of the dogwood is poisonous to humans. Animals, on the other hand, find its rich calcium level and high fat content very nutritious. At least 36 species of birds are known to eat the fruit. Many mammals, including foxes, skunks, rabbits, deer, beaver, black bears and squirrels also eat dogwood fruit. Foliage and twigs are also heavily browsed by deer and rabbits.

Of course, we don't want to plant dogwoods where they are not suited so I recommend that for droughty soils in full, day-long, sunny locations you consider a southern crabapple (*Malus angustifolia*) instead. It produces white to pink blossoms that make it quite striking in the spring. As with dogwoods, many species of wildlife love the fruit of the crabapple. Plant this tree where the small apples will not create a mess, such as by driveways and sidewalks.

**Stan Rosenthal is an Extension Agent with the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension.*

[\[Back\]](#)