Gardening and Landscaping for Climate Extremes

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: The trend to warmer weather makes it easier to grow plants such as this Erythrina crista-galli in north Florida.

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Warming trends and climate extremes are the new ‘normal.’ While average temperature and rainfall may only shift imperceptibly, weather extremes are becoming more frequent.

Whether you think our weather is a changing or not, there’s no denying we’ve had some extreme climatic conditions lately. These have included several years of drought, warmer weather, and even the shifting of the USDA Plant Hardiness Zones. We seem to be gradually changing to Zone 9 from USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 8B. And most recently we experienced 15 to 20 inches of rain from tropical storm Fay. So how can homeowners, landscapers, and gardeners compensate for these climate extremes?

One way is to make your irrigation water go farther by watering your yard and garden bed only when needed. One-half to three-quarters inch per week during the summer is usually plenty. If you don’t already have one, consider installing a manually operated irrigation system. There is no point in having a mindless timer running your irrigation system during a rainstorm.

Another useful practice is to apply two to four inches of mulch in garden beds. Mulch not only controls weeds but improves moisture retention and paradoxically soil drainage.

Putting the right plant in the right place will go a long way towards helping your landscape and garden to survive climate extremes. A book that can help in getting the right plant in the right place is “The Florida Gardener’s Book of Lists”, by Chaplin and Brandies. Another good reference is the “Southern Living Gardening Book.” There are many native plants, such as Southern woods fern, lopsided indiangrass, and Shumard oak that can be used in home landscapes.

Frost blankets can help your plants survive freezing temperatures. In the vegetable garden, light weight spun bonded row cover can extend the growing season and shade cloth can protect plants from our hot July and August sun.
Over the last several years, David Marshall, our Leon County Extension Horticulture Agent, has been introducing some tropical perennials that provide colorful blooms all summer long. While these plants are perennial in their native habitat, they do not always survive our colder winters. However, they do very well during our rather hot and humid summers and many give us a long period of color, from late spring until the first hard winter freeze. Come to the garden tours at the Extension center, 615 Paul Russell Road in Tallahassee, Saturday, October 18 to see these tropica ls and other landscape plants well-suited for our area. The tours start at 9:00 a.m., with the last one starting at 11:00.

Forests support biodiversity, water recharge and reduce global climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Trees also make our landscape cooler and reduce air conditioning costs. However, trees are a concern during hurricanes and high winds. A short list of tree species demonstrating the highest survival in hurricane winds are live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), sand live oak (*Quercus geminata*), American holly (*Ilex opaca*), southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), dogwood (*Cornus florida*) and sabal palm, to name just a few. Baldcypress, *Taxodium distichum*, has high wind resistance. The longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) and slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*) have moderate to low wind resistance. A more complete list of wind resistant trees can be found in The University of Florida publication, "Assessing Damage and Restoring Trees after a Hurricane." This document provides valuable information about reducing damage to your existing trees, evaluating survivability of damaged specimens; and most importantly, lists of trees and palms that have been observed to be wind resistant. [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP29100.pdf](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP29100.pdf).

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