Thoughts from the Garden

by

Ray Mikula

“The Importance of Water”

Water is the essence of life. All life depends on it. People can only last about 15 days without water. So what happens when we have a drought? Every plant has their own needs and each plant will respond differently. Some plants grow deep roots and others are quite shallow. The Tulip poplar grows rapidly upwards and invests little energy in root growth. It competes well in the forest for light gathering but lacks in water collecting because of shallow roots. So when the rain stops for a few weeks it begins to drop leaves to conserve water. Oak trees have deep roots and can last longer through drought before taking drastic action. Azaleas bloom in spring when there is usually an abundance of rain and snow melt. But the buds that were set in the fall need lots of water to swell and open. This spring we had no snow melt and not enough rain. My azaleas were not blooming at the same time as in past years even though there was sufficient warmth this spring. I stretched hoses out during the drought to jump start the blooming process for the azaleas and other spring blooming flowers. They began blooming within two days.

My fig tree this year had hundreds of small figs but they hadn’t started to swell and ripen. The long string of hot dry weather in July and August caused the tree to start dropping fruit to conserve water. I ran the sprinkler on it for three hours the next day and within a week the fruit began to ripen.

Plants have a need to reproduce by making flowers, fruit and seeds but their need to stay alive comes first. They will stop fruit production, drop leaves, delay flowers or drop them in order to first survive. So although you may have plants that are drought tolerant there comes a time when you need to water to save the flowers, fruits, and vegetables.

So visit your plants every day in the hot weather to see how they are doing. Respond promptly when they are stressed from the weather so they can fully recover. My azaleas responded to watering this year with abundant blossoms and the fig tree produced hundreds of figs.

I would be remiss if I didn’t share with you one of my favorite new plants I acquired this past year, the Starfish Flower plant or Stapelia grandiflora. When I bought it from a small greenhouse in the Carolinas, I was under the impression that it was a cactus. It is not related to cacti but is more of a succulent. It’s flowers smell like carrion to attract flys as pollinators due to a lack of other pollinators where it is found normally in South Africa. Flowers are more than 6 inches across.

If you stop by the Farmers Market at Rt 3 and Gordon Road be sure to visit the Master Gardener tent on September 9th and 23rd. See you there.