Garden Line - July/August - 2011

by Brent Moon - HPARD Urban Garden Manager

I start this month's article in much the same way I did the one for June, watching the rain fall. We are getting our first bit of rain in over a month here in Houston. I can only hope that this rainfall is more significant than the last, though I'm sure it will only be a drop in the bucket when compared to our current rainfall deficit. Still, we should be happy to get what we can.

With it looking much more like the end of summer than the beginning, our lawns, landscapes, and gardens are starting to look pretty haggard. I know I've been struggling to keep things looking presentable while trying to keep the ol' pocket book in mind. I dread seeing my next water bill. Still, it has been worth it, as I have been harvesting an abundance of tomatoes and peppers. My wife and I have already canned some salsa and plan to do some more soon. My tomatoes are winding down as the heat increases, but I should have enough for one more batch of salsa.

I've decided not to fight to keep my tomatoes alive like I typically do. It gets so hot here that once you get to July they are pretty much done, anyhow. Once I see them start to decline in the heat and all harvestable fruit is picked, I'll yank them out and put them in the compost pile. I should be able to keep the peppers, eggplant, and okra going all summer, with luck and a little help from Mother Nature.

To keep your vegetable gardens going strong during the heat of summer, remember to monitor closely for water needs. I use a soaker hose covered by a layer of compost and leaves to help reduce moisture loss. A side-dressing of fertilizer or an application of water-soluble fertilizer should keep your summer veggies productive. The same advice applies to your landscape plants, especially annuals and perennials. A little extra water and a light application of fertilizer will keep them going strong.

I have seen very few pests this year. That is one of the benefits of a dry summer, as I've noticed fewer pests in dry years. The exception may be spider mites, however, as they love it dry and hot. The few pests I have encountered have been leaf-footed bugs and some army worms on my tomatoes. Don't let your guard down, as pests could pop up at any time.

If the heat is just too much for you and your garden, that's OK, too. The heat of summer is a good time to add some compost to your garden and let it sit there until mid-late September. Of course, it's not really just sitting there. Microorganisms are hard at work breaking down the compost into useable components for your plants to utilize come fall. Just wet it down occasionally if we aren't getting regular rainfall (hard to imagine, I know) to keep the microorganisms active; hey, they need water, too!

Gardeners don't often do much planting or dividing in the garden this time of year, however, the iris is one type of plant that needs to be divided every few years to keep them from getting too crowded, and August is the month to do it in the Houston area. If y ours seem to be blooming well, you may not need to divide them this year. Cut back the foliage to within 3-4" of the ground and give them a bit of fertilizer for healthy new growth and they should be good to go for another year.

Summer can be brutal here in Houston, but try to take it all in stride; work early and late in your gardens to avoid the heat. Drink plenty of water (or your beverage of choice), wear a hat, and most of all, pray for rain! See you in the fall!