



## Henderson County Master Gardeners Weekly News Article      June 20, 2016

### **The Damp Garden, Wet Feet and Dry Ankles**

by Sherry Bitz

When I first moved to East Texas, gardening in sandy soil was new to me, and my soil is extremely sandy. Water drains through it like a sieve, which I wasn't expecting. I also wasn't expecting this much drought. The sand and drought presented a real dilemma: how to keep my moisture loving transplants happy and thriving while being environmentally responsible.



Enrolled in the Henderson County Master Gardener course, my instructor, Rick Hirsch's baritone voice rang in my ears, "Don't fight nature. It'll beat you every time. Work with it." How can I work with Mother Nature on this one? How do I enjoy a lush, verdant garden in hot, dry, sandy conditions? The answer came: build a "damp garden." A damp garden is designed to slow water percolation long enough to create a favorable environment for plants that prefer or tolerate "wet feet, but dry ankles." It's an adaptation of the so-called bog garden. If you would like to try one, it's really simple; it just takes a bit of digging.

Create your damp garden by selecting a garden site and plan as usual, keeping good garden design in mind. Excavate the soil to a depth of 12" to 18" to form a basin. Store the soil close at hand on a large piece of plastic or cardboard. You'll be putting it right back. Note that the soil pile can get pretty impressive if you're ambitious, so plan ahead. The area of the damp garden can be any size you desire; it's the depth that counts. The sides should be mostly vertical and the bottom mostly flat, but this design is very forgiving.

Once the basin is dug, line the bottom and sides with a piece of 4-6 mil plastic or 30-45 mil EPDM rubber. Plastic is cheaper and easier to work with while EPDM is tough, lasting 25 years. Allow plenty of excess liner around the perimeter of the basin to allow for settling once the basin is refilled. Cut several 10" slits in the liner base about every foot for drainage. If gophers and/or moles are a problem, line the basin with galvanized hardware cloth or a heavy, woven weed cloth barrier before laying in the liner. Use rot/rust resistant materials. To expedite watering with a hose, install perforated pipes vertically in the corners or use soaker hoses buried three inches deep and two feet apart.

Amend the excavated soil with compost and return to basin. Tamp down the soil 1" below the surrounding soil level. After you have done your planting in the dry soil, mulch heavily, then gently soak with a sprinkler. More than likely the soil will sink. Wait a day or two then add more soil or mulch. Trim the excess liner to 12". Finish by simply burying the excess liner under mulch, soil, stonework, brick, pavers, or landscape timbers.

Some marginal aquatic plants to try in a damp garden include: bog lilies, cannas, creeping jenny, dwarf horsetail, dwarf papyrus, dwarf variegated sweetflag, Japanese, Louisiana and Siberian iris, pickerel rush, ribbon grass, little ruby creeper, sensitive plant, spider lily, star grass, thalia, variegated spider lily, taro and

zebra rush. Experiment by trying moisture tolerant plants like daylily, turtlehead, bee balm, foxglove, and foam flower.