Gear your garden up for summer sun

By Laura Murphy

May in Lake Havasu is our transition month from spring to summer. The days will become increasingly warmer and the cool nights will disappear – along with the cold tap water. People who love water sports may rejoice but gardeners cringe.

The days are longer, the sun is getting higher in the sky and shadows shorten. Many of our friends are saying good-bye and are migrating to their cooler, summer homes. For those of us that stay here year round, it is time to gear up for the warmer weather and those special challenges that being a gardener in Lake Havasu can bring.

Watering

Proper watering is the number one most important action in the desert. Too little and your plants will not survive, too much and your plants won’t survive either. The most common mistake people make is watering small amounts often. Aim for watering long and deep. Water long enough to get the water 12 inches deep for small plants, 24 inches for shrubs and 36 inches for trees.

Watch for signs of drought stress in your plants and make corrections quickly. A stressed plant has a much greater chance of dying not only from the heat but also from disease or insect infestations. A stressed plant will have leaves that look dull in color or are slightly wilted looking. Be aware though that too much water will give almost the same symptoms. If in doubt, dig down around the plant to make sure before you apply more water.

If your home has switched from a septic system to the sewer system, you will need to be very careful and monitor your trees and shrubs growing in the vicinity of your leach field. Plants are very opportunistic and their roots find their way to any available water source. Your old leach field will no longer supply water or nutrients to nearby plants. You will need to increase your irrigation to this area or risk losing your plants. This is especially critical for trees.

Planting
Now is a great time for transplanting palms and cacti. These plants need a warmer soil temperature to stimulate good root growth. When transplanting cacti make sure you place in the same orientation they were previously growing. If you make a mistake and turn the plant around, what was growing facing the north side will sunburn if planted facing south. Many growers will mark the south side of susceptible plants.

Trees and shrubs can still be planted this month but there is not enough time to establish good root development before our very hot weather. Therefore these plants will need more water and a careful eye to get them through their first summer.

Annuals that you planted earlier in the year are showing the effects of heat and old age. Replace with their warm season cousins to brighten flower beds and walkways. Petunias, cosmos, zinnia and verbena are available now.

Pruning and Fertilizing

Prune lightly from now until cooler weather arrives. Now is not the time for a drastic pruning. Spring growth may need to be trimmed back on hedges or trees. Over exuberant species such as oleander and bougainvillea can be trimmed to keep in bounds. Be careful about exposing tender wood to the intense summer sun. Remember, plants will sunburn just like you!

Likewise, now is not a good time for heavy fertilization. This will cause tender new growth to form which will sunburn. Forcing a plant to grow faster now can create stress for it and weaken it to the point that it will not survive the summer.

Pests and Problems

Bugs are out in force this month. They find the weather just right. It is not too cold and not too hot. Be on the look out for aphids, leaf hoppers, flea beetles and grape leaf skeletonizers. Watch for any bug that eats the leaves or sucks nutrients out of your plants. These will weaken your plants and can cause them to succumb to the summer heat. Treat quickly to reduce damage.

Birds fill the air with song and while many will eat bad bugs and weed seeds, they will also peck at and destroy fruits, vegetables and seedlings. Protect your developing harvest with bird netting, available at most nurseries and gardening centers. Keep rabbits out of newly planted areas with fencing.

Keeping a watchful eye as the summer progresses is the most important thing gardeners need to do in the desert. With our extreme summer weather conditions, problems need to be corrected quickly for plants to make it through. So be aware, be watchful and keep cool!

Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105 or come to Home Gardening Day 11 am to 1 pm the first Tuesday of every month.