



Urban Harvest

Take Steps to Create User-Friendly Gardens

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We have been lucky to date in avoiding early summer heat, but having celebrated Memorial Day last weekend, our luck will surely come to an end soon. Don't let the heat turn you into an air-conditioned hostage until football season is in full swing. To benefit from year round use of your garden space, incorporate elements that make it more user-friendly. Here are a few ideas you might try.

If you want to stay away from the sun's heat, block its rays. Add shade by planting trees or building a structure. Trees not only provide a shady retreat in the garden, but if properly



A simple arbor provides a shaded entry to the garden.

placed to shade your house from the south and western sun angles, they also significantly reduce the utility costs for cooling it.

Shaded air conditioner units will also lower your electric bill. Large, deciduous (so they can allow sun in winter) canopy trees are the best candidates for shading both garden and home.

Canopy trees tend to be slower growing trees, but there are three that outpace most others - Mexican

Sycamore (*Platanus mexicana*), Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) and Lacebark Elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*). Start with a 30 gallon tree and in two to three years it will cast a fair amount of soothing shade. If you are willing to give it some time, any of the oaks (*Quercus* spp.) will do.

Understory trees or large shrubs trained as trees are quicker to reach mature height and still supply considerable amounts of shade as they usually grow 15 to 25 feet tall. Mexican Plum (*Prunus mexicana*) and Chinese Fringe Tree (*Chionanthus retusus*) are spring flowering understory trees that work well in small urban gardens.

Possumhaw (*Ilex decidua*), a deciduous relative of Yaupon Holly, provides a spectacular display of bright red berries after the leaves fall, and while Southern Wax Myrtle doesn't wow us with flower or fruit, its leaves are aromatic and song birds are attracted to its berries.

Training a large shrub into a small tree requires pruning to develop a trunk and branching system, but it is probably the fastest way of getting shade in the garden, especially if you start off with a 15 gallon plant. Typically we see Wax Ligustrum and Crape Myrtle as tree formed specimens, but Vitex (*Vitex agnus-castus*) or Almond Verbena (*Aloysia virgata*) are summer flowering shrubs that would be a welcome addition to any garden.

Shade structures provide instant protection from summer sun. They can be simple or elaborate, depending upon your purpose and your budget.

A structure with a solid roof allows the installation of ceiling fans that not only create a cooling breeze, but also deter mosquitoes, which like calm conditions. Enclosing the structure with screening ensures a bug-free zone for garden enjoyment.

The structure can also be as simple as a few posts and beams that support utility panels (a farm fencing material). Any number of vines can be trained up the posts and over the panels to provide sanctuary from the summer sun.

Water in the garden has a psychological cooling effect in our gardens given our humid summers, unlike outdoor spaces in arid climates where it has physical cooling properties. The sound a water feature provides has a soothing quality.

Water features range from gurgling bird baths to thundering fountains. Like any built element, they too can be simple or elaborate, depending upon your purpose and your budget.

Two ways water actually has physical cooling properties in Gulf Coast gardens are swimming pools and outdoor showers. While swimming pools may not be practical for most, it does not get any easier than an outdoor shower that hooks up to the garden hose. Many can be found online or through mail order catalogs.



Consider adding the outdoor lighting missing from the garden.

Lighting allows usage of the garden after sunset, when summer temperatures are not only tolerable, but often pleasant. Average daytime temperatures for the summer months range from 91 degrees Fahrenheit to 94 F, but once the sun goes down, things begin to cool off nicely, with temperatures averaging 72 F to 74 F. Moonlighting that is placed high in tree branches produces a soft wash over a large area and is best installed by lighting professionals.

However, low-voltage lighting can produce dramatic effects and is easily installed by a homeowner. Simply plug in the transformer, connect the electrical cable and snap the light fixtures onto the cable where desired. If the cable lies in a planting bed, simply cover it with mulch - no need to dig. A variety of systems are available online or at your local hardware store.

Finally, incorporate some plantings into the garden that add nighttime interest. Look for a place to plant some Four O'clocks (*Mirabilis jalapa*), Moonvine (*Ipomoea alba*) or Night Blooming Jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*). Their late afternoon/evening fragrance provides another reason to spend more hours in the garden after dark.



White flowering plants, like Dwarf White Penta glow in the garden at night when temperatures are most inviting.

Any white flowering plant will glow at night and there are a number of annuals, perennials and shrubs that would make excellent choices.

Plants with a crisp white variegation to the leaf, such as Variegated Pinecone Ginger (*Zingiber zerumbet* "darecyi") or Variegated Hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* "variegata") also add a sparkle to the evening garden.

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