

Drought: Survivors and Non-Survivors

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Though I have gardened in the Maremma region of Tuscany for almost thirty years and have become inured to our hot, dry summers, I had never experienced such a devastating drought as that of last summer. I keep lists from year to year of seasonal flowering, resistance to cold and of almost anything else which interests me or seems in any way unusual. The last drought survival list I made was in 1993, a year in no way comparable to 2003 for the length and severity of the dry season.

Some of the effects of last summer's drought were already apparent half way through August and not only in the garden but in the surrounding *macchia*, most obviously in the small local maples, *Acermonspessulanum*, whose leaves had turned a premature brown rather than their usual autumnal yellow. I feared they might actually have died but was unable to verify this as I'd broken my knee and was on crutches.

The entrance to my garden runs beside an untrimmed hedge of Strawberry bush, *Arbutus unedo*, which, as the summer wore on, began to look ever more dilapidated, many leaves falling and others withering along the edges. Normally this hedge is never watered but with the danger of losing it altogether appearing imminent, an exception was made and each of the seventy plants was doused with a 12-litre bucket of water. Though this undoubtedly saved the hedge it did not make it look much better so even more drastic action was called for. Towards the middle of September when it seemed that rain could not be far away I cut the entire hedge back to a height of three feet, a procedure not without risk for, unless autumn turned out to be mild and rainy, the shrubs would probably not have time to put on and ripen enough new growth to enable them to withstand the winter. On the other hand waiting until the spring would mean coddling them through the following summer, not a particularly enticing prospect.

Between the hedge and the entrance to the house is an unwatered bank planted with a mixture of local shrubs, bay, laurustinus, myrtle, lentisk and *Rhamnus alaternus*. Of these only the lentisk and the *Rhamnus* came through completely unscathed. The others all suffered from browning of their leaves, and, in some cases, from dieback of entire branches. There seemed to be no particular pattern, one plant standing proudly up to the drought while its neighbor wilted visibly. I can only assume that the survivors had managed to squeeze their roots further down between the rocks to a patch of damper soil.

Another part of the garden is backed by a holm oak hedge, *Quercus ilex*, probably the most common native plant and therefore, I had thought, one best suited to the local climate. Nonetheless large patches of the hedge turned brown. I left it untouched over the winter partly for lack of time and partly to see which branches re-sprouted in the spring; alas, I have a good deal to cut out in the next few weeks.

The plants mentioned so far are all in areas which are never watered and where some losses were probably to be expected. However even within the areas covered by driplines there were casualties. The escallonias in particular were hard hit and looked so miserable that I cut them down to ground level, not without some misgivings, as one or two, though not in any way Mediterranean plants, were among the oldest and most wide-spreading plants in the

garden. Happily all quickly produced new shoots, though it will be a long time before they attain their original girth. Some of the newly planted young shrubs, including certain *Ceanothus* and a collection of *Cistus* from Olivier Filippi, also succumbed despite extra care in the form of protective mulches and regular watering. Others, surprisingly, survived, among them several varieties of *Clematis viticella*, thus confirming my view that these are not only beautiful but also the best clematis for Mediterranean gardens.

So far I have only mentioned plants which, to a greater or lesser degree, were injured - a rather one-sided approach, given that certain plants came through totally unscathed. Not a single rosemary suffered, not even those planted on a rocky bank near the entrance and a long way from the garden itself and any form of care. *Cneorum tricoccon*, a small shrub from the Western Mediterranean, was a winner. Though modest in appearance, like box it submits to any amount of clipping and can be used for the same purposes. Its flowers are nondescript but the seedheads attractive and, above all, it is apparently totally resistant to drought. I have to add that at the Margheriti nursery in Chiusi, I was told I was the only customer ever to have bought one! Perhaps prospective customers will now change their minds.

I have no complaints of shrubs from other Mediterranean climate areas, for none collapsed or even showed signs of doing so. *Romneya* and *Fremontodendron* flowered in their usual way. A couple of newly planted Geraldton Wax Flowers, *Chamelaucium uncinatum*, doubled in size, while *Westringia*, *Eremophila* and *Coleonema* held their own without losing a single leaf.

Another outstanding group consisted of five seedlings obtained in 1996 from Bert Wilson's nursery near San Luis Obispo: an *Arbutus menziesii*, an *Arctostaphylos manzanita* 'Dr. Hurd', a *Heteromeles arbutifolia*, a *Rhus integrifolia* and a Californian live oak, *Quercus agrifolia*. He told me to plant each in a large hole near an oak tree (for the beneficial effect of the mycorrhiza), water them thoroughly and then forget them, instructions carried out to the letter though at the time I was not at all convinced that they would succeed. Now, nearly eight years later I have five large, flourishing plants, all seemingly quite impervious to anything our weather can throw at them. Are Californian chaparral plants tougher or is the mycorrhiza working its subtle magic? I simply do not know.