

Gardening Under Adverse Conditions

Most areas experience conditions that play havoc with gardens and it is likely that these extreme events will become more frequent as our climate changes. You can save months of work and maintain your food supply by being prepared. A small backyard garden can be protected if you are vigilant. Visit your plot every day if you can, to see what it needs.

Heat

Many plants get stressed by extreme heat and stop growing; others like lettuce will run to seed quickly.

- Check your 'sow what when' charts so that you plant varieties suitable for the season. Seedlings appearing in shops are not a good indicator of seasonal suitability.
- Use tropical and subtropical varieties that love heat, such as Asian greens and perennial spinach varieties.
- Plant seedlings where they will get some shade, especially in the afternoon.
- Plant lettuce, rocket and other leafy greens between larger plants where they will get some shade. Try planting sunflowers around the edges for shade in summer.
- Have a summer garden with shade and winter garden with more sun if you have room.
- Create shade for plants with propped up shade mesh, bits of bushy twigs, palm fronds or bracken fern pushed into the soil.
- Give plants an early morning water and water the roots again in the cool of the evening (try to avoid getting the foliage wet) on scorching hot days.
- Use seaweed feeds to increase plants' heat resilience.



Frost

Cold air flows downhill and settles in the lowest points where the air is still. Even areas that don't normally frost can get one occasionally.

- Find out if your area and your particular garden gets frost. Ask neighbours who have lived in the area a long time what to expect.
- Check labels and seed packets for information about frost hardy varieties.
- Provide temporary cover for your plants on clear, very cold nights. You can use sheets, upturned large pots, cardboard boxes etc.
- Gently hose frost-bitten plants in the early morning before the sun reaches them. Plants are damaged when the sun hits the ice crystals.
- Use hay bales and fences to create sheltered areas where very cold air cannot flow into.
- Get to know your micro climate as it can vary enormously. Find the warmer areas.
- Plant near large rocks and brick walls to take advantage of the thermal mass which will keep the temperature in the immediate area above freezing.
- Leave frost bitten parts of plants as they can provide some protection until danger of frost is over.
- Investigate commercial products that increase plants' ability to withstand frost.
- Feed your plants with liquid seaweed as this can strengthen plant cell walls and so increase resilience to frost.
- Grow plants in containers such as polystyrene boxes, which can be moved out of frost.
- Use grow tunnels, homemade mini green houses, and balcony plantings if there are particular plants you want to get through the winter.



Hail Storms

- *If the storm grey skies turn any shade of green, protect your plants.*
- *Make hail shelters using old frames covered with shade mesh.*
- *Have shelters (tarpaulins or old frames covered with shade mesh) on hand to place over your plants, but be aware that high winds may accompany the storm and destroy the shelters.*
- *Cover garden beds with tarpaulins, shade mesh, plastic, bed sheets, etc, preferably with some support underneath (e.g. bricks) to prevent the weight of the hail crushing the plants underneath.*
- *Use garden tables and other furniture, cardboard boxes, flyscreens etc if there is no time to lose.*
- *If plants do get shredded, don't give up! Give them a good liquid feed and they may recover.*



Very Wet Conditions

The subtropical wet season can be very hard on gardens so be prepared to cope with very heavy downpours.

- *Establish garden beds in higher areas of your block. Avoid low, potentially soggy parts of the garden.*
- *Raise garden beds by hilling the soil or edging the beds with bricks or wood and building up soil inside.*
- *Study water flow on your block and improve the flow with small channels, agricultural drains etc.*
- *Fertilise plants after very heavy falls that will leach nutrients out of the topsoil. Quick liquid feeds of worm juice, weed and compost teas, or seaweed will keep them growing.*
- *Pull mulch away from the stems of plants during periods of very heavy rain to prevent plants rotting.*



Very high humidity is common during the wet season and plants can become very susceptible to fungal diseases and root rotting.

- *Improve ventilation by thinning plants or trimming them back. Give sprawling plants something to climb over and to allow air movement around them*
- *Water plants in the root zone, never the foliage.*
- *Water in the mornings rather than the evenings.*
- *Use organic anti fungal sprays (either homemade or commercial brands) that also build resilience. See the recommended books & websites.*

Keeping Out Brush Turkeys, Wallabies, Dogs & Chickens

- *Surround the beds with a low fence of bent over chicken wire that allows you to lean over and reach the plants.*
- *Enclose the area with a metre-high fence and gate. The fence can be useful as a trellis.*
- *Build a polypipe structure that you can stand up in with shade mesh or bird mesh for walls and ceilings. The door can be on hinges or made of overlapping flaps – depending on how persistent your critters are.*

