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### **Drought Is Not a Four Letter Word**

It has been said that Texas weather is a persistent drought punctuated by periods of rain. This is true to a point, as rain in Texas is irregular at best. It is not uncommon for even the most humid and rainy parts of Texas to go without rain for a month or two. However, as we all know, we are currently experiencing what can only be defined as a “true drought” ... one definition I read of drought was, “a period of time that’s too dry”.

Droughts are a familiar face to Texans. This drought is a continuance of what we experienced last year. 2008 has been recorded as one of the driest years on record, with drought conditions across Central Texas during last year as the most severe since the drought of 1917-1918, or the droughts of the 1950s, or the droughts of 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2006. Starting to see a pattern? 2009 isn’t over, so we may be living the most historic one yet.

In Texas, just a few months of below normal rainfall can cause a drought. This is due to the fact that drought conditions feed on themselves. Less moisture in the ground means less moisture evaporates into the air, bringing higher temperatures and little rain. Other factors will also affect drought, such as a high pressure system that won’t move away. Historically, Texas experiences extended severe droughts every 20 to 25 years.

How big of a deal is this? For native flora and fauna, maybe not so big. Texas plants have evolved to withstand prolonged dry spells, and if it wasn’t for those dry spells, our natives would eventually be overtaken by all the imports. Native animals also know how to survive droughts, although how they do it is not very pleasant. They survive by drops in birthrates and death. Most species are adapted and can withstand a loss in numbers. It’s the introduction of humans and our survival requirements that change the equation.

We aren’t truly adapted to drought, and neither are our domesticated livestock and food crops. We use lots of water; we plant landscapes for our pleasure that don’t always work well with the environment in which we live. Overgrazing of rangeland can deteriorate topsoil and lead to “desertification”, increasing the impact of a drought.

The choices we make in how we live can definitely help improve how we, and our environment, survive and recover from drought. The state provides resources to help ranchers and farmers better manage herds and croplands to lessen the affects of drought, such as mitigating soil erosion to maintain proper soil moisture and its capacity to support vegetation. A good site to visit:  
<http://rangeweb.tamu.edu/drought/publications.html>.

It’s up to the rest of us to change our habits in order to conserve water, as well as live more cooperatively with our native environment and weather.

Take grass, which most of us overwater. Water thoroughly and as infrequently as possible. Fertilize once in the spring and again in fall to prevent excessive growth, which demands frequent watering. Use native grasses where appropriate, since they require no watering. Check out the EarthKind program. EarthKind Landscaping helps you conserve water, reduce fertilizer and pesticide use, and reduce yard waste ([aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind](http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind)).

Plant a wildscape. It’s a Texas Parks and Wildlife program. You can get a sign in your yard once you’re certified ([www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildscapes](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/wildscapes)).

Drought is an inevitable fact of life. If planned for, then when the next one hits, we may hear less about land misuse, failing crops, and rainfall records, and more about how well we are taking care of our environment.

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