



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROB CRANDALL, METHOW NATIVES

The outside story

Bring some Methow Magic to your landscape

BY SANDRA STRIEBY

Plants are the source of much of the Methow's magic, and by

putting the right plant in the right place you can create the same kind of magic in your own landscape.

Whatever your goals for your landscape, there are some special considerations for planting in the Methow. This article focuses on three factors that affect landscaping success: hardiness, drought tolerance, and fire resistance.

HOT AND COLD

Long cold winters and hot dry summers challenge plants. Climate-adapted species and cultivars will do best, and locally grown plants even better.

Erin Gardner, co-owner of Wild

Hearts Nursery, says "When we started growing all of our plants ourselves, we saw a huge change in not only the hardiness of the plants when we're caring for them but also the hardiness when we sell to our customers."

Hardiness varies within the valley, as well. A plant that will succeed near Carlton may not do well in Lost River. Says Gardner, "There are some plants that just don't want a long winter—there won't be that thrive factor."

Rob Crandall, founder of

A few favorites

Kirsten Cook cites creeping Oregon grape (*mahonia repens*) for its small stature, fire-resistant leaves, and tidiness—“it doesn’t shed a lot of material.”

Rob Crandall recommends penstemons, buckwheats and fleabanes for their flowers, and adds several flowering shrubs that are customer favorites—serviceberry, chokecherry, mock orange and hawthorne.

Erin Gardner favors

Siberian peashrub (*caragana arborescens*)—tolerant of drought and poor soil, and a nitrogen fixer that will create its own fertilizer and improve the soil. Since peashrub can self-seed readily in moist soils, she does not recommend it in riparian areas lest it become invasive. Spirea is another favorite—there are many cultivars of varying size and flower color; spirea blooms early and “the fall color is just stunning.”

Methow Natives, echoes that, saying of locally-grown plants: “They’ve been through the rhythms of having harsh winters. Plants that are grown here are going to be better-adapted; people will have better success with them.”

WATER

Even native plants need water when they’re getting established in a new place, and many plants will need supplemental water throughout their lives to grow well and stay healthy. Gardner explores irrigation with customers, asking “What is their plan for long-term watering?” Whatever your water source, you’ll need a way to get the water to the plants. Whether simple or elaborate, an irrigation system will require time and a financial investment to create and maintain.

Crandall recommends planning to water for at least two years. “People can look at natives and think low- or no maintenance,” he says, adding “Even if the goal in the long run is low maintenance, you do need to put in some energy to help it get to that place.”

FIRE

Fire is part of the Methow ecosystem, and landscaping

with fire in mind is essential. Most important, in Crandall’s words: “Keep fuels to a minimum around the house.” Kirsten Cook, Firewise program coordinator for the Okanogan Conservation District, cites recent research to support that recommendation: “The area within 5 feet of the foundation is very crucial. Flammable materials in this zone will increase the risk of ignition significantly.” (See Cook’s article, “No excuses: new homes should be ready for wildfire,” on page 24, for more about fire-protecting your home.)

Within the zones that Cook has outlined, plant spacing is key. Think vertically as well as horizontally. In the vertical plane, the relationship between trees and the understory will affect fire’s ability to move into the tree canopy as well as through the landscape. Fire spreads readily when it reaches the canopy, putting both people and property at risk.

On the ground, plants that are too close to structures or to each other can help fire spread. “Structures” include decks and fences as well as buildings. Cook emphasizes that spaces between plants or group of plants break the fire pattern and help keep fire from spreading. Remember, fire needs fuel. Think of every



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plant as a source of ignition. If the plant catches fire, what will the flames do? Will they reach your deck? The eaves of your house?

In planning plant spacing, consider the mature size of your

plants. Plants are living things, and every individual will grow differently depending on its heritage and circumstances. It's not possible to know exactly how big a plant will become when you

place it in your garden. There are guidelines, though, that will let you estimate the plant's size when it's full-grown. Books like Sunset magazine's "Western Garden Book" include size ranges. Nursery staff can tell you how a plant may respond to your site based on soil type, sun exposure, watering regime, and other factors.

The plants themselves affect fire resistance, too. Some plants are naturally more flammable than others—including many natives, such as conifers, sagebrush and other Artemisia species, and Snowbrush (*Ceanothus velutinus*). Other plants have characteristics that increase flammability in the landscape, such as high litter production; open growth habit; and low moisture content. Plants that are well-watered and healthy are less likely to burn. Selecting plants that are easy to maintain can make a difference, too. When choosing plants, think about how easy it will be for you to keep them pruned and remove

Firewise planting resources

Fire-resistant plants for home landscapes. Specific to Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. www.firefree.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Fire-Resistant-Plants.pdf

There is a Firewise demonstration garden—located at the Douglas County Fire District No. 2 fire station on Eastmont at Fourth Street in East Wenatchee.

Almost-local guides; check

with a nursery to make sure the plants they recommend will be suitable for your site:

- Fire-resistant plants for Chelan-Douglas County, Washington: s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2086/2018/01/fireresistantplants2017.pdf
- Fire-resistant plants for Chelan-Douglas County, Washington: s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2086/2018/02/fireresistantbrochure2017.pdf

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