**MICROCLIMATES IN YOUR GARDEN**

By Penny Pawl Master Gardener May 29, 2008

I’ll bet you don’t realize it, but you probably have microclimates. In fact they are everywhere in Napa County. Sunset Western Garden Book defines a microclimate as “A small area with a slightly different climate than that of its larger surroundings.”

Another definition from the Internet is that a “ microclimate is a climatic condition confined to a relatively small area, within a few feet above and below the Earth's surface and within canopies of vegetation. Microclimates are affected by many factors, such as temperature, humidity, wind, turbulence, dew, frost, heat balance, evaporation, the nature of the soil and vegetation, the local topography, latitude, elevation, and season. Weather and climate are sometimes influenced by microclimatic conditions, especially by variations in surface characteristics”. In short, there are differences from place to place.

There are many advantages to having these microclimates. If you identify them correctly, you can have the perfect growing conditions for almost any special plant. Take advantage of the great variety of microclimates in Napa County.

Two hundred feet up the hills is very different from the valley floor, and while the hills get more rain, and an occasional snowfall, they are often spared when the valley itself is sparkling with frost. I’ve heard the hills referred to as the Banana Belt of Napa County. I believe those lucky people can grow more tropical plants than we flatlander’s can.

To find out what kind of microclimates you have in your yard and garden, take a walk around and check for spots that are different from their neighbors. This can vary with the seasons: what’s wet in winter may not be during the summer.

Dry spots under shady trees can present planting challenges. While many plants won’t grow well under dry shade conditions, there are some that thrive, such as heavenly bamboo varieties (Nandina), dead nettles (Lamium), lily turf (Liriope muscari) and African iris (Dietas species). In fact, this plant will grow under almost any condition.

My neighbor has a Smoke Bush (Cotinus) growing in the shade of two tall trees. It only gets water when it rains and yet it blooms beautifully every year. Our local native iris, Pacific coast and Douglas (I. douglasiana) are also good choices for dry shade.

If you find a place next to your house, in shade that is continually moist and slow to dry out, then you have located another microclimate and have a choice of what to plant in that area. There are many flowering plants that do well under damp, shady conditions, such as cyclamen (Primulaceae), plantain lily (Hosta), hydrangea (Hydrangea), and camillia (Theaceae). Older camellias also grow well in dry shade. When my house was lifted a few years ago, it changed the microclimate of the bed by my front door. Before the work, the bed had stayed damp because of the roof overhang, and was in shade a good deal of the time. Now it is getting much more reflected heat from the outside wall and has become an area for drought tolerant plants. An old camellia is doing very well in this new climate.

In the middle of the yard where the sun always shines and it gets all the elements that Mother Nature throws at us why not try one of these plants: lavenders (Lavandula), lavender cotton (Santolina), red hot poker (Kniphofia), salvia (sage), yarrow (Achiellea Tomentosa), butterfly bush,( buddleja) and dwarf bottlebush (Callistemon species). This list is endless and if you stick to Mediterranean type plants, you will save water also. These plants will also grow well on the west side of your house with no trees and hot summer sun.

I recently rediscovered red hot poker and found it is available in other colors beside red. There are whites, greens, pinks and yellows, plus dwarf varieties. Yarrow comes in all sizes so you can get a ground cover or a tall variety to suit your fancy Salvia come in so many colors and sizes that you can have all the colors of the rainbow.

By taking advantage of these various microclimates, you can easily cut water needs for your plants and have a diverse landscape. Don’t be afraid to try something different. It just might be the choice you will wish you’d made long ago!

As you walk through the nursery be sure to read the description labels on the needs of the plants, remember what you’ve learned, and then put them in the correct microclimate. For more information on plants for the tough places in your garden, look at Tough Plants for California Gardens by F. Rushing and Sunset Western Garden Book. I know it’s hard to resist some plants but if you do a little research you will plant the right plant in the right place!!