

Waterwise Gardening

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Drought is common in the West; however, even in years with normal rainfall, water conservation should be a priority in every landscape. A well-designed water-wise landscape can be just as colorful and beautiful as one that is water thirsty. To achieve the perfect balance between a lush and water-smart landscape, you will need to keep these water-saving basics in mind:

1. Improve your existing soil. Incorporate organic matter, such as compost, peat moss, and worm castings into your soil to help retain moisture. If you plan to use California native plants in your landscape—see # 4—they will actually perform better when planted in native soil without any amendments.
2. Design your landscape into “hydrozones,” plants with similar water, soil, and exposure needs, grouped together in the same “zone.” Thirstier, sun-loving plants such as roses, annuals, and day lilies should share one area, while more drought-tolerate plants, such as lavender, redbuds, catmint, fescue, and sages need to hang out together so they stay happy with limited irrigation. Also, put your thirstiest plants closer to the house where it is easier to irrigate, and the native, drought tolerate plants further from the house.
3. Use mulch around your plants. A three-inch layer of mulch will conserve soil moisture and keep out weeds that steal moisture from your plants. Mulch is any material that protects soil surface and allows air and water to the soil. Mulch can be compost, cut bark, shredded bark, hazelnut hulls, and even shredded newspaper.
4. Plant native shrubs, trees, and flowers in your landscape. Check out the U.C. Davis Arboretum All-Stars, a list of native plants that are attractive, thrive in California’s Mediterranean climate, and are also either low maintenance, drought tolerate, or attract beneficial wildlife. You may find out more information about the Arboretum All-Stars at http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/arboretum_all_stars.aspx.
5. Install a smart irrigation system and water deeply and efficiently. Know what sprinklers you will need for each hydrozone in your landscape. Design your system to put the required amount of water to each zone without wasting water that runs down the slope or into the gutter. Decisions whether to use sprinklers, drip, or micro-sprays can be made easier if you take your landscape design to an irrigation supplier who can help make the correct choices for your water-wise irrigation system.
6. Use permeable surfaces for the paths and patios in your landscape. Let rainfall percolate down to the plant roots. Using gravel, decomposed granite, spaced flagstones, or porous concrete allows rainwater and irrigation to pass through them and into the soil, preventing wasteful runoff.
7. Take advantage of rainfall and use a rain barrel. These are fun and water-smart. Rain barrels can hold 50-60 gallons of water, which you can use to water your houseplants and your pots on the patio or deck. Set your rain barrel underneath a downspout to collect run-off from the roof.

Become water wise by improving the quality of your soil, planting flowers, trees, and shrubs in the right place with other plants with similar needs, controlling weeds with mulch, watering deeply and irrigating efficiently.

The next Master Gardener class will be held on Saturday, June 9th. Learn how to take advantage of vertical spaces and get instant color in containers. Master Gardeners will show you how to plant containers, talk about the best types of containers and tell you how best to care for the plants once you put them into containers. This free three-hour class starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.