Ten Tips for Water-Wise Gardening

In Marin, as in most of California, we enjoy a Mediterranean climate found in only 2% of the world's land mass.   This climate gives us mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. But droughts are part of our natural weather cycle, and when winter rains are minimal, our water becomes even more precious. Over half of our residential water is used on landscapes. Consequently, conserving water in the garden can have a huge impact on our water supplies. You don't need to give up a beautiful, lush landscape when you create a water-wise garden. Here are some tips for creating a healthy, inviting garden requiring minimal resources and less effort and expense.

1. <u>Go With the Low Flow</u> – Use soaker hoses for irrigation, or invest in a drip system that can cut water use by as much as 90%. Consider installing a 'smart controller' for your irrigation system that can save water by helping to calculate your water requirements and adjusting to changes in water needs. Be sure to check regularly for leaks.

2. <u>Irrigate Early</u> – Watering early in the morning when temperatures are cooler and there is less wind will minimize evaporation. This also discourages pests like snails and fungal diseases like black spot that need wet foliage at night.

3. <u>Go Deep</u> – Water less often and more deeply. This encourages deeper root systems that can better tolerate dry periods.

4. <u>Get in the Zone</u> - Group plants with similar water needs together to make watering easier and more efficient. Place pots and thirsty plants near the house where you can keep an eye on them, and use native or Mediterranean plants farther away where they may need very little water once established.

5. <u>Mulch Like Mad</u> – Create a 1" to 3" layer of organic material such as bark, shredded leaves, or grass clippings over the top of the soil and a drip irrigation system. You will be amazed at what a huge difference this makes in reducing moisture loss from soil, in moderating soil temperatures, in controlling weeds that compete for water, and in returning nutrients to the soil. Be sure to keep mulch a few inches away from the stems or trunks of plants.

6. <u>Count on Compost</u> – Add organic matter like compost to the soil to increase the soil's ability to absorb and hold water, and to slowly release nutrients to plants keeping them less stressed and susceptible to pests. If you feed plants, use a slow-release, organic fertilizer to discourage excessive plant growth that attracts pests and increases water needs. Find out more at https://tinyurl.com/m75eofl .

7. <u>Go Native!</u> – You will find a wonderful variety of water-wise plants in local nurseries. Look for plants that are native to a Mediterranean climate, or for California natives that grow in dry conditions. These plants are adapted to our hot summers and usually more resistant to pests. Once established, many of these plants can survive on rainfall alone. Consider replacing declining plants with a species better suited to our climate. Learn about natives from the MCSTOPPP website at https://tinyurl.com/me2fdbv .

8. <u>Fall into Planting</u> – When working on a large planting project, remember that the best time to plant is in the fall when the weather starts to cool. Winter rains will help these plants establish deep, healthy root systems before they have to tolerate the summer heat.

9. <u>Lessen the Lawn</u> – Lawns need more water than most other landscaping, so consider reducing or replacing your lawn with water-wise groundcovers, low-maintenance perennials or a porous hardscape. If you plant a lawn, choose drought-resistant varieties such as buffalo grass. Mow less often and raise the height of your mower blade to 3" since longer grass will shade roots, lessen evaporation, and inhibit weed growth. Learn about sheet mulching to reduce your lawn area! Go to Page 27 at https://tinyurl.com/m75eofl .

10. <u>Get Wise to Weeds</u> – Keep up with weeding since weeds will compete for water. A drip system, mulch and landscape fabric will help you prevent weeds.

Additional Tips for Water-Wise Vegetable Gardening

In addition to a drip system, mulch and compost, here are some ideas for saving water when growing vegetables:

- Choose early ripening varieties and plant close together in blocks instead of rows to create shade for roots and reduce evaporation.

- Chose plants that fit your growing conditions and try heirloom varieties adapted to hot climates.

- Harvest fruits and vegetables as soon as they are ready, and pick up fallen and over-ripe fruits that may attract pests.

- Grow fewer varieties and choose vegetables that will produce a lot of food on one plant, like tomatoes, squash and peppers.

Resources

- <u>Our Water Our World</u>: www.OurWaterOurWorld.org A wonderful collection of fact sheets with tips on healthy gardening, caring for roses, lawn care, and managing common pests.

- <u>UC Statewide IPM</u>: www.ipm.ucdavis.edu Extensive information on managing pests and diseases that may affect drought-stressed plants.

- <u>Plants and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates</u>, EBMUD, 2004. A perfect resource for choosing appropriate plants and designing your garden.

- <u>WaterSmart Gardening</u>: www.watersmartgardening.com Plant lists, visual tours of gardens, watering guides, and resources all organized by county.

- <u>Your local water district</u>: Many districts provide recommended plant lists, watering guidelines, rebates for removing lawns and saving water, and water saving tips. In Marin, go to www.marinwater.org (Marin Municipal Water District) or www.nmwd.org (North Marin Water District).

- <u>Greywater Action</u>: www.greywateraction.org – Ideas for using water from sinks, showers and washing machines to irrigate your garden.