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keeping your garden dry

WITH XERISCAPING, YOU CAN CREATE A BEAUTIFUL GARDEN WHILE SAVING TIME, MONEY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

by JILLIAN STEINBERGER

YOUR WATER BILL IS APPROACHING ASTOUNDING PROPORTIONS, yet your plants look half dead. It's hot, it's dry, it's ... Indian summer in the Diablo Valley. Fear not, help is a page turn away. Grab a fan, lie back on your chaise, and read our guide to water-wise gardening.

California is a dry state. In our Mediterranean climate, drought is part of the natural weather cycle for roughly half the year. According to the experts, we're getting dryer. The Sierra snowpack is getting lighter, and plants once native to Mexico are gradually overtaking native flora from the Pacific Northwest. Meanwhile, California's rising population has increased the demand for water. According to Chris Dundon, Water Conservation Director at the Contra Costa Water District, over 60 percent of that water goes to home gardens. According to Dundon, an average home with six sprinkler stations can save up to fifty gallons per day by reducing watering time by one minute on each station.

If you're thinking that a pretty garden is a selfish desire, think again. Dry gardens are a win-win alternative; by installing a xeriscape, you have a garden planned and planted for beauty and enjoyment as well as water (and cash) savings. Xeriscape reduces landscape water use by 30 to 75 percent, plus generally requires less maintenance and less work.

Xeriscape uses efficient irrigation—if it uses it at all—particularly during the first couple of years, while

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plants are establishing root systems. It also uses xerophytes—plants that tolerate or even require dry conditions—of which there are plenty, for just about every garden style from sparse and minimalist to lush and pastoral. An added bonus to growing plants that are well-adapted for their conditions typically means they have greater pest resistance and generate less yard waste.

A dry garden can have several looks depending upon your style and how much water you're willing to "buy."

California natives garden

Are you a hiker? Do you appreciate California's natural history? Do you simply like color, fragrance, and butterflies? Then consider installing a California natives garden. California's indigenous plants evolved to survive six months of hot, dry weather. This means they need minimal irrigation. Planting such a garden helps restore the native landscape and supports birds, bees, and other wildlife.

Keep in mind that you can interpret "natives" liberally and draw on unique plants from all over California, Mexico, and even the Pacific Northwest. Or, you can interpret natives strictly, by determining your biome (a major ecological community type) and developing your plant list from that. Diablo Valley biomes include coastal sage scrub, chaparral, central oak woodland, valley grassland, and mixed evergreen forest. With over six thousand native plants and tremendous floral diversity, Californians have many choices when it comes to choosing natives that perform well in the home garden.

Natives are highly effective on a large plot of land that you don't want to fuss over or otherwise maintain, such as a hillside or exposed flat areas. Let the plants get established, and watch them take over.

Closer to the front door, it isn't a stretch to plant a fragrant garden with native trees like bay laurel; flowering shrubs like mock orange; any of California's seventeen colorful salvias; California rose; perennials like the spectacular wooly bluecurls; and mints like yerba buena and bee balm.

For color, there are even more choices: trees like the magenta-flowering redbud and the pink-flowering desert willow; shrubs like honeysuckle and bush anemone; bright-flowering perennials like Indian paintbrush and California fuschia; annuals such as sunflowers; and bulbs like the mariposa lily.

Alternatively, for a spare desert look you might plant prickly pear and barrel cacti, agave, or desert sage, among many others.

Mediterranean plants

A Mediterranean garden draws on plants from any area of the world with a Mediterranean climate. This gives you a very wide palette.

To narrow it down, you might plant a culinary or medicinal garden with plants chosen from actual Mediterranean countries. This garden will be both colorful and fragrant. It will need some water during the dry season—with a few exceptions, this is a "low water," rather than a "no water," garden.

Your plant list might include dwarf and full-size lavender cultivars with blooms of white, yellow, pink, purple, and blue. You might mix in waving yarrows in bold golds or soft reds. There's a rosemary for every purpose—creeping rosemaries for ground cover and spilling over rock walls, and prostrate rosemaries for shrubs and hedges. Yellow-flowering santolina is a fragrant touch. Thyme, oregano, and marjoram make soft, fragrant ground covers. Indeed, you might grow a rich carpet of herbs in varying shades and textures, or plant them between flagstones for a fragrant walkway.

For height, bush germander, from Spain, is an elegant addition. It can be pruned as a medium-sized shrub, or allowed to express itself wildly over a larger space. Its long, slim arms of gray foliage topped by spikes of lavender flowers are dramatic as cuttings in the vase. This plant does beautifully with no summer water.

As does oleander, native to Morocco and Portugal, which acts as a perfect screen, windbreak, or boundary. This lush, tall shrub flowers in a

range of bright and cheerful magentas, corals, pinks, reds, and purples.

In this garden, a fig tree, native to Israel, would provide luxurious shade as well as convenient outdoor snacking (don't forget the grapes also).

You say you're not a purist? Well, then, the options are endless, limited only by your imagination.

You might design a dry garden using plants with silver foliage, which are typically drought-tolerant. You would have many choices, from blue-flowering germander sage to yellow-flowering Jerusalem sage to purple-flowering Russian sage or native Cleveland sage (and the list goes on). You might mix in lamb's ears and santolina for ground cover, and fountain-like butterfly bush or pink-flowering lavatera for height and structure. For a spot of lipstick-red, there's California fuschia or Indian paintbrush; and the glorious matilija poppy can fill up a field.

You have so many choices for a stunning yet water-wise garden. So, let's evolve along with the environment. **VLM**



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waterless gardening resources

FREE SOFTWARE

The Contra Costa Water District (CCWD) mails a free Water-Wise Gardening CD-ROM to county residents (and charges a modest fee to others) with handy tools and resources to analyze and design your outdoor spaces. It displays many styles of water-efficient gardens and lets you learn more about the plants in each of those you like. CCWD also offers a free, quality, water-wise hose attachment and other water-saving gizmos. For information, visit CCWater.com/conserv.

DRY GARDENING WEB SITES

StopWaste.org: Bay Friendly Gardening is an invaluable resource for smart gardening techniques. They also offer highly reputed workshops.

H2OUse.org: California Urban Water Conservation Council offers helpful information on xeriscape and related topics.

EBCNPS.org: California Native Plant Society, East Bay Chapter provides information, events, and workshops for natives enthusiasts.

RuthBancroftGarden.org: The Ruth Bancroft Garden's Web site offers information on succulents, agaves, yuccas, cacti, and other drought-tolerant plants that grow well locally. Monthly plant profiles (with pictures) go back roughly four years. If you see something you like online, you can view and visit the plant in real life and even purchase it at the garden. There is also information on seminars, workshops, and events about dry gardening. (For more on Ruth Bancroft Garden, turn to page 26.)

BOOKS

Plants and Landscapes for Summer Dry Climates, by EBMUD (EBMUD.com)

Complete Guide to Native Perennials of California, and *Complete Guide to Native Shrubs of California*, by Glenn Keator (Chronicle Books, 1990 and 1994)

SHOPPING

The Dry Garden Nursery has an excellent selection of rare and drought-tolerant plants, particularly aloes, agaves, yucca, cacti, and such. Definitely worth a visit. 6556 Shattuck Avenue, Oakland, (510) 547-3564

Annie's Annuals' user-friendly online store has several "Totally Useful Plant Lists," including lists (with pictures) of natives and drought-tolerant plants. Annie emphasizes color, so if it's bright hues you seek this is a great place to look. 740 Market St., Richmond, (510) 215-1326, AnniesAnnuals.com

The Cactus Jungle offers a huge selection of cacti, succulents, grasses, and bamboo. They also offer garden design, container gardening, and installation services, specializing in xeriscaping. 1509 4th St., Berkeley, (510) 558-8650, CactusJungle.com



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BEFORE YOU PLANT:

Develop a plant list now, but wait until the rainy season (late fall through early spring) to plant. This helps new plants settle in before the hot season. Buy plants in one-gallon cans or smaller; "youngsters" will establish more easily.

Group plants with similar water and sun requirements together, a practice called hydrozoning. Before planting, add organic matter (compost) to improve soil structure. This increases water retention and penetration, plus provides nutrients that plants need for growth.

After planting, add two to four inches of mulch; sustainable natural materials like bark nuggets or gravel are best. This keeps the soil cool, and conserves water during the hot season, while also deterring weeds.

Water efficiently. To prevent evaporation, water in the morning or in the evening. Perform efficiency checks and make adjustments to your irrigation system seasonally. Drought-tolerant plants should get no more water than they need.

Limit lawns, the thirstiest landscape component, to useful spaces such as children's play areas. Choose drought-tolerant turf-grasses; alternatively, replace lawns with trees, shrubs, boulders, and pathways or mulched areas.

NATIVE CALIFORNIA PLANT CHOICES FOR YOUR WATERLESS GARDEN:

cedar
Jeffrey pine
madrone
manzanita
lupine
wild lilac
spice bush
artemisia
evening primrose
penstemon
columbine
snapdragons
mimulus
clarkia
mesquite
jojoba
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