

Twelve Tips for Water-Wise Gardening

By Our Water, Our World and Sloat Garden Center

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, so 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. Go With the Low Flow** – 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. Make sure that your irrigation equipment is functioning properly and is the right system for the job. Be sure to check regularly for leaks. Replace washers on hoses and water bibs to prevent leakage. Run water at a moderate flow rather than opening the tap all the way, especially when hand watering. Use shut-off valves on hoses so that water is not wasted as you move about the garden.
- 2. Irrigate Early** – 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 such as black spot that are encouraged by foliage that stays wet overnight.
- 3. Water Deeply** – Water less often and more deeply. This encourages deeper root systems that can better tolerate dry periods. Irrigate for an appropriate amount of time. You do not save water by irrigating for a shortened amount of time; it's actually just the opposite. When you don't add enough water to the root zone, plants get thirsty faster and more water is lost to evaporation. The result will be that you'll need to be irrigating more often. You will get better results irrigating for a longer period of time (more deeply), less often. Watering early in the day is always recommended to cut down on evaporation. Never water to the point of runoff. Focus your watering, whether an irrigation system or hose watering, on the plant root zones and don't allow runoff down the sidewalk or driveway.
- 4. Get in the Zone** – 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. Mulch Like Mad** – 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 to keep roots cool, 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. We recommend Redi Gro Bark Mulch and Sloat Forest Mulch Plus.
- 6. Count on Compost and Coir** – 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.



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7. **Go Native!** – You will find a wonderful variety of water-wise plants in our 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.
8. **Fall into Planting** – 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. **Lessen the Lawn** – Lawns need a lot of water, so consider reducing or replacing your lawn with water-wise ground covers, 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. Your city or local water agency may offer you a cash rebate for replacing lawns and installing efficient irrigation. Sheet mulching, a layered mulch system that suppresses weed and grass growth, is a very efficient method for reclaiming the space and provides a good base for replacement with low-water-use ground covers and shrubberies.
10. **Get Wise to Weeds** – Keep up with weeding since weeds will compete for water. A drip system, mulch and landscape fabric will help you prevent weeds.
11. **Choose fertilizers carefully.** Use transplant fertilizers (such as E.B. Stone Organics Sure Start) at the time of planting to establish the plant. Feed with an organic fertilizer that is generally lower in nitrogen than their synthetic counterparts 6 weeks later, especially vegetables and flowers. Established plants need a feeding in spring and late summer, or fall at minimum, to keep them looking good. Consider using dry organic or slow release fertilizers in containers as opposed to water soluble foods. Dry fertilizers will feed your plants for a longer period of time.
12. **When you’re planting new plants,** consider using water-holding polymers such as Soil Moist. The non-toxic granules will hold water longer than soil alone, thus minimizing moisture loss due to evaporation.

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.
- Choose 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.