

Go Green For Saint Patrick's Day

by Francie McGowan

According to tradition, leprechauns and fairies were mischievous. They pinched, tripped, and played tricks on humans when they crossed paths with them. The people who wore green, however, could not be seen by the wee folk, so they passed by in peace. These days, if you don't wear green on St. Patrick's Day, you can expect to be pinched by a fellow human in order to keep up the tradition.

This year, after so many years of drought, we have been pinched by Mother Nature. Water is scarce, so the plants and trees are stressed. Spring starts just three days after Saint Patrick's Day. This is a good time to turn your garden green. Not the color green, mind you, but the effect your garden has on the environment. There are numerous ways to make your garden more environmentally friendly. Little by little, plant by plant, you can have a green garden in just a few seasons.

First on the list is to dig up that green lawn, the biggest water guzzler in your garden. The lawn does nothing for the environment, nor for the rest of the garden. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the average American house uses 320 gallons of water a day. 30% of that water is for outdoor use. Half of that is used on the lawn.

There are many alternatives to a lawn. *Diamondia margarete*, for instance, is a low-growing ground cover that has tiny yellow flowers. It is hardy, drought-tolerant and has a wonderful silvery-green color that goes well with any plants in the garden. Meadow grasses are beautiful alternatives to lawns and reflect the natural environment of the Motherlode foothills. Hardscape is another alternative to incorporate in area that was covered by lawns. Stone paths, water features, dry creek beds are all beautiful additions to a garden.

Next on the list of ways to turn your garden green is to toss out the chemicals. Composts from kitchen scraps and plant wastes are much safer for adding nutrients to the soil. Used as a mulch on top of the soil, compost reduces water evaporation and controls weeds. For pest control, you can plant natives that are drought-tolerant and attract bees, birds and butterflies, all of which feed on little critters while they pollinate your plants.

Some native plants that attract hummingbirds are: columbine, California fuchsia, coral bells, blue flax, lupine, heart-leaved penstemon, autumn sage, manzanita and California buckeye. For butterflies, yarrow, buckwheat, deerweed, monkey flower, sage and coyote mint are good choices. Songbirds are attracted to Manzanita, Toyon and Nevin's barberry, to name a few.

Although native plants need regular watering until they become established, they need very little water after. The mountains around us are studded with native plants and trees that survive in the driest of years and still thrive and bloom. Mother Nature doesn't use any chemicals to produce such splendor. Chemicals used in the garden are washed into the mountain soil and waterways, and eventually end up in the oceans of the world, wreaking havoc with underwater plant and animal life.

Due to the chemicals and fertilizers used in farmlands along the Mississippi River, each spring to summer there is a "Dead Zone" in the Gulf of Mexico the size of the state of Connecticut. The fertilizers feed the alga and plants along the river, resulting in a huge "plume" that blocks the sun from underwater flora and fauna, then dies and sinks, killing all life beneath it.

The final thing to consider in turning a garden green is water usage. Rain barrels, drip irrigation and soakers are a few of the tools that reduce water consumption. Drip and soaker hose irrigation reduce water use in the garden by using 50% less water than sprinklers. Watering in the early morning or late evening reduces evaporation from the sunshine during the day.

So, on St. Patrick's Day think green, wear green and watch out for the wee folk, lest they spot you and pinch you. When you receive shamrocks (oxalis) as Saint Patrick's mementos, remember that they are invasive. Don't plant them. Hopefully, as our awareness of green gardening grows, so will our native plants, even in drought years.

Erin Go Bragh!

Francie McGowan is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.