April 8, 2015

Missing March Miracle Means More Mulch!
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Our prayers for another "March Miracle" rain went unanswered. We're now officially and deeply entrenched in our 4th consecutive year of a severe drought.

As water saving regulations, both voluntary and mandatory, are being implemented, there are some hard choices we home gardeners need to make.

Do we give up on our gardens and let the plants become parched tombstones -- wilted memorials to wetter times? Or do we get creative and find ways to reduce water use while still nurturing a green garden?

No doubt you've heard about, and possibly considered, some of the more tried and true water reduction methods such as switching to drought tolerant native plants or installing a drip system. Both are worthy solutions. But one of the simplest, least expensive and easiest solutions for reducing garden water use is to apply a thick layer of mulch.

Mulches are hardly a new concept. They've been successfully used for centuries by gardeners who applied a cover layer of straw, leaves, pine needles and/or loose earth to protect newly planted trees and shrubs.

Good mulches perform at least three basic functions: Reduce moisture loss, reduce weed growth and protect young roots from temperature extremes. The ideal mulch will also improve the health and fertility of the soil and enhance the garden's visual appeal.

Summer mulches should be applied right about now, when the soil begins to warm up and more regular waterings are needed. In a recent study, garden experts found that soils in mulched garden plots retained their moisture nearly twice as much as bare ground plots. Soil temperatures

were also reduced by as much as 13 degrees. As a bonus, they found that the average amount of time required to remove weeds from a properly mulched garden was reduced by two-thirds.

Mulches form a layer between the soil and the atmosphere which prevents sunlight from reaching the soil surface and reducing evaporation. However some mulches can also prevent water from reaching the soil by absorbing or blocking water from light rains.

Mulches are applied to the top soil around trees, flowerbeds and in vegetable gardens. Mulch layers are normally no less than two inches thick and are usually spread by hand around emerged plants. Remember that mulch material should not touch stems or trunks.

A variety of materials can be used as mulch. Typical organic mulch materials include grass clippings, leaves, hay or straw, wood chips, bark nuggets, peat moss, newspaper/cardboard, sawdust and manure. Organic mulches also have the benefit of enriching the soil as they decompose.

Understanding the attributes of the different materials can help you choose the best mulch for you.

Dry leaves should be chopped or shredded before application (a lawn mower will cut them into the perfect size). This shredding allows the material to better decompose and will permit the water to more easily seep down to the soil.

Grass clippings should be dried and mixed with the shredded leaves or rough compost to provide aeration and to facilitate decomposition.

Peat moss is a popular and long-lasting mulch that is often mixed with pine needles for better aeration. But be aware that the pine needles can lower the pH of the soil surface, but is a delight for acid loving plants – blueberries, for example.

Mulch from woodchips should be laid down in layer at least three inches thick. These chips are most often used under trees, shrubs and in large planting areas. When placing mulch around soft stemmed plants leave a four to five inch mulch-free zone to prevent stem rot or other possible diseases.

Straw or hay make great mulch and is normally sold in compressed bales. This common material is biodegradable and neutral in pH. But it also is more likely to be contaminated with weed seeds. Salt hay is less likely to have weed seeds than field hay.

Newspaper and cardboard mulches are best used as base layer upon which heavier mulch is placed.

There are inorganic mulches made from recycled tires, plastic sheeting and rock and gravel. In cooler climates, rock and gravel may help extend the growing season because of their heat-retention properties.

There are several other ways to reduce garden water use. Gardens planted in enclosed spaces, like a raised garden bed, will retain water better than gardens planted in open soil.

The best time to water is in the late evening and early morning hours, typically between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. The cooler morning temperature and limited wind reduce water evaporation rates.

Drip irrigation is at least 50 percent more water efficient than a sprinkler system. Drip irrigation systems are relatively easy to install for most do-it-yourself homeowners.

Plant fruits and vegetables that do well in hot and dry climates. Many heirloom varieties are known to be drought tolerant. Some plant varieties bred for containers often produce a more bountiful yield than more traditional varieties.

Avoid planting water hogs! Some local favorite water-efficient edibles include asparagus, chard, eggplant, mustard greens, peppers, roma tomatoes and California native strawberries.

Plant a smaller garden. If you've overproduced and wasted crops in the past, decrease the number of plants. It also helps to group together plants with similar water needs.

Water Saving Information
To help you with our state's on-going water conservation efforts the Master Gardener organization, through the UC system, has compiled several helpful tips regarding home gardening and irrigation:
http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/Drought_/Drought_Gardening_Tips_/.

Join UCCE Master Gardeners and Master Food Preservers for a combined youth course for Kids' Expo at this year's county fair. This course will emphasize planting, cultivation and harvesting needs of the strawberry, along with food safety and canning procedures. All youth enrolled in this course will take home their own jam and strawberry plant, and will be encouraged to enter their jams/jellies and plants into the county fair competition. The free class begins Saturday, April 11th at 10:00 a.m. at the Fairgrounds, 100 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardener Steve Savage will teach a free class on Landscape Trees & Shrubs: Selections for the Foothills, this Saturday, from 9:00 a.m. to noon. Learn how to get started, which trees and shrubs work best in the foothills, and how to bring everything together to create a pleasing, survivable landscape. There will be special emphasis on drought tolerant plants including trees, shrubs, perennials, and ground covers. The three-hour class is at the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building, 311 Fair Lane, in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are also offering monthly free classes in conjunction with the Cameron Park Community Center; April 15 from 9:00 a.m. to noon is "Living with the Oaks." Learn all about the majestic trees of our region at Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive, in Cameron Park.

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UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, 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.edu/edmg. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook.