

Water-Wise Gardening in a Drought Year

by Mary Buckley, Mendocino County UCCE Master Gardener

Drinking-quality water from your tap is a luxury beyond the reach of most humans who have ever lived! Drought years teach us to appreciate the water we have and become more water-wise in our habits.

University of California experts offer some of the following ideas for outdoor water conservation:

Water-Wise Vegetable Gardening

- **Do not expand vegetable beds** this year. Help drought-stressed local farmers by buying veggies at farmers' markets.
- **Focus on infrastructure**—compost bins, beds (non-raised), paths and paving (permeable), greywater systems (now legal in Mendocino County!) and water catchments. Windbreaks slow evaporation and save water (if they don't use any themselves).
- **Don't plant thirsty vegetables** like berries, onions or corn. Try herbs, root crops (if planted early) and early, fast-maturing veggies. Tomatoes, peppers and squash need less water than most people think.
- **Plant veggies close together** in blocks to shade the soil and optimize irrigated areas. Group plants with similar water needs, and water each group appropriately.
- **Mulch!** On paths and large dry areas, spread wood chips over cardboard, newspaper or landscape fabric. On veggie beds, spread straw or other clean organic material. Mulch lightly if rain still has a chance of soaking through, but heavily in summer.
- **Row covers** help retain moisture.
- **Strategic drip irrigation** uses less water than sprinkling. Position soaker hoses or drippers under mulch—water roots, not mulch or paths.
- **Water at dusk or dawn.** If a handful of soil holds together, or a screwdriver goes in easily, it doesn't need watering yet.
- **Don't let weeds hog the water.** This is a good year to tackle voracious competitors.
- **Harvest promptly**, as soon as vegetables are ripe. Compost plants as soon as they finish producing.
- **Rinse veggies in a bowl** instead of running water; use the rinsewater for plants. Do it outside for less lugging!
- **Compost scraps** instead of using the sink disposal; compost also retains water in the soil.



Master Gardener Louisa Aronow stands on a "wood-chip sponge" in the Kol Ha'Emek Biblical Garden in Redwood Valley.

Water-Wise Landscaping

- **Learn how your irrigation system works.** Adjust schedules, emitter placement, etc. for optimal watering, and avoid runoff. Don't water sidewalks or neighbor's yards!
- **Don't water in wind or sun.** Only water plants you value most—and not until the soil is dry.
- **Minimize fertilizer use**, which stimulates growth and water demand.

- **Do not plant thirsty plants** like ferns, redwoods, or anything with “bog” or “marsh” in its name. Choose drought-adapted local-native or Mediterranean-climate plants.
- **Aerate your lawn, mow higher, and leave clippings in place.** Don’t water until footprints stay visible (grass doesn’t pop back). Better yet, let the lawn go brown—it’s easy to reseed—or replace with xeriscape plants or rock mulch.
- **Do a leak check.** Turn off all water, then watch your meter. It should not change; if it does, you probably have a leak. Even a small leak wastes lots of water—finding and fixing it ASAP may significantly reduce your next bill!

Water-Wise Fruit Tree Tips

- **Don’t plant new fruit trees** in a drought year. Young trees demand consistent watering.
- Mature **apple trees can survive** without water.
- **NO winter pruning** for most fruit trees (peaches are an exception), as pruning stimulates growth. Once fruit sets, prune carefully, then reduce summer watering.
- **Thin young fruits** early and severely. Think survival rather than harvest—don’t expect big, juicy fruit this year.
- **Make basins full of mulch** 3’ wide x 6” deep around the dripline of small trees (avoiding trunks), and fill with water every 2-3 weeks.
- **Keep “tree buckets” in your kitchen and bath** to collect water you’re waiting to get hot, or any nontoxic water or ice that would otherwise go down the drain.
- Water trees with **dishwashing soakwater**: Soak dishes; squirt non-phosphate, low-sodium soap on a scrubber and wash dishes using soakwater and setting them in a sink or drainboard. Dump soakwater in bucket. Rinse dishes OVER the empty dishpan, creating new soakwater.

Train yourself to be water-wise, and find more ideas of your own!

RESOURCES:

Greywater-system info: scwa.ca.gov/graywater.

UC drought-info links: http://cemendocino.ucanr.edu/Living_with_Drought/

Master Gardener helpline: anrmgmendocino@ucanr.edu or 463-6360.

