

How to Save Water in Your Garden
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The heat of the summer is upon us and will be for quite a while, so how can a landscape survive this dry, scorching weather? For gardeners, plants are prized possessions and sometimes we overdo the attention paid to them, especially when it comes to watering. Too much water has killed more plants than too little!

The amount of water present in soil is called the moisture content, and it must match the needs of each plant. Some plants such as ferns and azaleas need more moisture than succulents and cacti, so the first rule in water-wise gardening is placing plants with like water needs together. For instance, it would not be a good idea to plant an azalea next to a succulent; depending on how much you water them, one or the other is not going to survive.



Adding organic matter to the soil is another strategy for saving water. Soil is essentially a collection of mineral particles of different sizes, and if most of the particles are large, like sand, water passes through rapidly. If most of the particles are small, like clay, water will penetrate the soil much more slowly. The solution for either problem is the same: Add organic matter in the form of compost, chopped-up leaves, or composted manure. If at least an inch or two of organic matter is added each year, it will improve the texture and water-holding capacity of the soil.

Delivering water to a plant's root zone through drip irrigation is the preferred method of watering; 90 percent of water applied in this manner is available to your plants, as opposed to 40-50 percent from overhead sprinklers. Drip irrigation also minimizes evaporation loss and keeps areas between plants dry, which also helps limit weed growth.

Organic mulches can cut water needs in half by blocking thirsty weeds and reducing evaporation. They also increase the humidity level around plants. Chopped or shredded leaves and organic compost in a 4- to 5-inch layer make excellent mulches; just be sure to keep any mulch material about 2 inches away from the plant crown so rot does not occur.

Choosing plants carefully for your landscape will mean less work for you in the long run. Varieties that are native to our area and those that do well in a Mediterranean climate like ours will adapt much better and require less maintenance than non-natives.

It has been said many times before, but bears repeating: Lawns are among the thirstiest and most labor-intensive plantings in a landscape, and getting rid of them or, at the very least, decreasing their size, will go a long way in saving water. Consider planting low water-use groundcovers or perennials instead.

Finally, if you can, delay planting ANY new plants until fall. They won't need as much attention and will have a chance to establish good root systems before winter hits. They may not even need much irrigation in the beginning if rain comes a little early.

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard to answer your questions. Use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu or leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512. We'll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.

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