



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

New Year's Resolutions for the Garden (December 23, 2023)

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Adviser, Emeritus

A good gardening goal for 2024 is to become a more conserving gardener, one who is more in tune with our local environment. New Year resolutions are never easy--but making small changes can add up to being more environmentally friendly. Here are some resolutions that will help you reach your goal.

Grow MORE Vegetables and Herbs: Okay, we all know that living in the San Joaquin Valley affords us three growing seasons, but we still mainly use our landscapes for admiring rather than for growing food. Start small and try a couple of vegetables at a time each season, and only a few plants of each. Perennial herbs are both beautiful to admire all year and use in the kitchen, while annual herbs (like most vegetables) have specific seasons for growing and producing with a minimum of care.



Grow MORE Fruit Trees: Evergreen citrus trees provide fruit in winter and spring, and deciduous fruit trees provide luscious fruit in summer. Find a spot where there is room, and you can have a backyard orchard without too much fuss. In the 1990s, the "Backyard Orchard Culture" was introduced and promoted by nurseries. Fruit trees can be grown on either standard or semi-dwarfing rootstock and maintained at a much smaller size. Two to four trees can be grown in the same amount of space needed for

one full-sized tree. Or buy a "cocktail" tree with several types of fruit (peach, plum, and nectarine) all on one rootstock. Bareroot season is here, so trees are available now! The big trick is to prune them in the summer after they have produced their crop. Keep them small and manageable, and the rewards will still be big.

Grow LESS Lawn: We've been spoiled by the look of luscious green lawns surrounding New England cottages where rain and snow are plentiful and the summer season is actually very short. Some parts of CA are like this, but not here in the San Joaquin Valley. We need to adapt to our low rainfall seasons and our hot, dry summers that persist for the majority of the year. If you've got kids or pets, then you'll want some lawn area, but choose a warm-season Bermuda or a buffalograss lawn over a cool-season tall fescue turf, and you could save 25% on your water bill for the year.

Mow and Blow LESS: Besides saving on water, smaller lawns mean running the lawnmower for fewer minutes, which conserves gas and noise pollution. Blowers are noisy, stir up dust, and blow away topsoil in the process. It doesn't take any longer to sweep a driveway, patio, or walkway than it does to blow them. I can appreciate how handy blowers are for big jobs, but I still think that they are overused in most neighborhoods.

Plant FEWER summer annuals and water-loving perennial plants – Plant MORE water-wise perennial flowers and shrubs: Planting winter annuals in the fall does not require excess watering, but planting summer annuals does. So, limit summer annuals to where they will provide the most dramatic effect with the least input of water. Use improved water-wise (drought tolerant) native and non-native perennial plants over water-loving plants. It is hard to know the difference at times, but ask at the nursery.

Compost MORE, fertilize LESS: As of January 1, 2022, people and organizations throughout California are required to separate organic material (mainly food scraps and yard waste) from other garbage. This year, I can at least start a compost pile with my coffee grounds and vegetable scraps in a designated small area. Add the practice of applying a thick layer of compost over your entire landscape a couple of times a year, and you'll notice a marked difference in soil health and plant growth. We tend to overfertilize our home landscapes, and the runoff can end up in our water supply, so I'll only fertilize IF needed.

Mulch MORE, Water LESS: Spring is the time to spread a thick layer of organic mulch around all flower and shrub beds and around trees. The thicker, the better for water conservation, cooler soil for the roots, and weed control. Just keep it from touching the bases of plants.

Water ONLY when needed: Gardeners of tomorrow have the potential to be smarter irrigators than gardeners of today, providing they're not lazy. Advances in computers, weather information, and smart irrigation technology are being combined and will soon be the norm.

Pour LESS concrete, incorporate MORE porous hardscapes: Rather than solid, impervious layers of concrete, the driveways of the future will combine strips of porous zones to accept rainfall and excess water rather than letting runoff flow into streets and gutters.

End GOAL: "Gardening Central Valley Style"--our term for "Sustainable Landscaping."
Have a Happy New Gardening Year!

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:
Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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