

Slide 1

WATER-WISE YARD MAINTENANCE

Ken Martin

Master Gardener Ventura County

My name is Ken Martin. I am a master gardener and live in Camarillo with my wife who is also a master gardener. I'm going to share some thoughts on maintaining a water-wise yard. To do that, I want to give you an idea of my experience.

MARTIN'S YARD BEFORE



Three years ago our yard looked like this. Freeway daisies, Bermuda grass, and a huge magnolia whose roots were thick just below the surface of the whole yard. We wanted a more water-wise, natural-looking yard. We had a preliminary design from a landscape architect and lots of help from a landscape installer. So after some planning, a lot of work, and six month's time we achieved our goal.

MARTIN'S YARD AFTER



A year later our yard looked like this. The reason I'm showing you this is so you can see where I'm coming from when I talk about water-wise yard maintenance.

PLANT INVENTORY

- ▶ **Ground Cover**
- ▶ *Dymondia* (Silver Carpet).
- ▶ *Achillia x moonshine* (Yarrow)
- ▶ **Trees**
- ▶ 3 each *Olea europea* “Swan Hill” (Fruitless Olive)
- ▶ 3 each *Arbutus x Marina* (Strawberry Tree)
- ▶ 1 *Pittosporum* ‘Silver Sheen’.

These next slides list the primary plants incorporated in our yard. We planted large areas of dymondia and yarrow ground covers. For this reason we elected to use sprinklers and some bubblers rather than drip irrigation. All of these plants have been characterized in various sources as “water-wise”, “drought tolerant”, or “require low water use” except for possibly the pittosporum.

PLANT INVENTORY Continued

▶ Shrubs

- ▶ *Correa pulchella* (Australian Fuchsia)
- ▶ *Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens* (San Miguel Island Buckwheat)
- ▶ *Lavandula Augustifolia* (English Lavender)
- ▶ *Penstemon 'Sour Grapes'*
- ▶ *Verbena bonariensis* - Purple Top
- ▶ *Salvia* (Sage) three varieties: *greggii* (gray), *spathacea* (Hummingbird Sage), pozo blue.

Again, all these plants require little water. It should be noted, however, that for the first year after planting a fair amount of water is needed to insure the plants are well-established. For the first year you may not save much or any water.

PLANT INVENTORY concluded

- ▶ **Grasses**
- ▶ *Festuca glauca* (blue fescue)
- ▶ *Bouteloua gracilis* (blue grama grass)
- ▶ *Miscanthus sinensis* 'morning light'
- ▶ *Nassella tenuissima* (Mexican feather grass)

Here are the grasses we used. Now I hope you have a little feel where I'm coming from as this talk is based to some degree on my experience the past year or so..

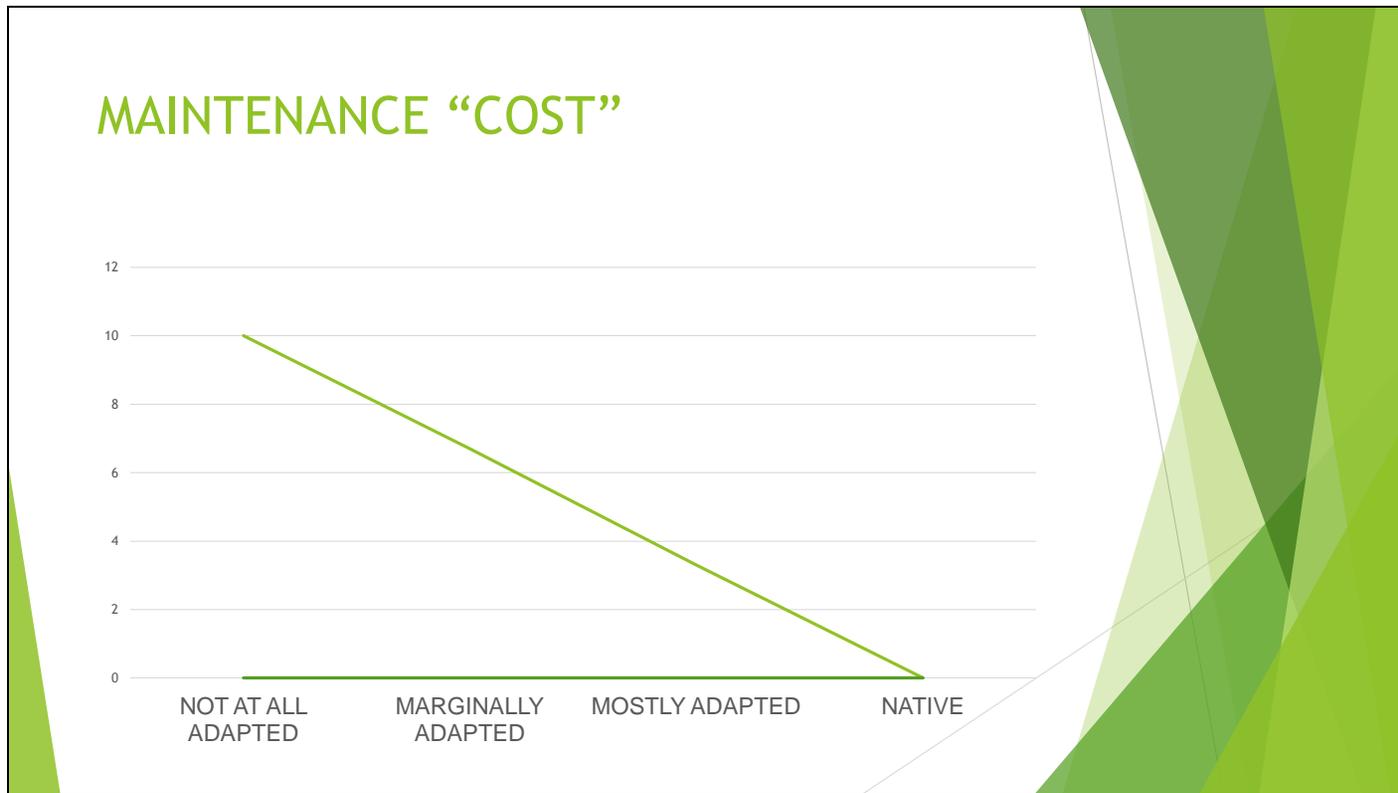
ASSUMPTIONS

- . Trees and shrubs are selected to be adapted to your climate, slow growing, and when mature will be in proper scale to the yard.
- . There is a thick layer of mulch on the ground

Slow growers tend to need less water and fertilizer. Consider material for hedges that don't require constant trimming but have a more natural look. Nobody trims vegetation in meadows and forests yet they look pretty good.

The mulch can be inorganic like pebbles or rocks, or organic like wood chips, leaves, and plant trimmings. I prefer the organic mulch in that it eventually decays into nutrients that will be used by living plants.

Besides reducing the need for fertilizer, a thick mulch slows water evaporation from the soil, reduces weed growth, and makes easy work of pulling of weeds that do manage to grow.



Here’s a maintenance cost chart that I borrowed from Dr. Jim Downer who works for the University of California and is an advisor to Ventura master gardeners. At the far right you can see if you have a yard where all the plants are native to your area, your soil conditions, and available water the maintenance would be very low. At the other end of the chart you can envision a yard planted with material that is incompatible with the soil conditions, climate, susceptible to insects and other pests in your area. The maintenance here would be high. A well designed water-wise yard in Ventura County with Mediterranean climate plants would probably fall in the mostly adapted range.

WATER- WISE YARD MAINTENANCE

OK, now you've torn out your sod and replaced it with water-wise plants

You've installed an up-to- date and efficient irrigation system

What maintenance is required?

▶ First, what maintenance is not required?

What maintenance is not required?

NOT REQUIRED

Weekly lawn mowing and edging
Pesticides and Herbicides
Fertilizers

You can get rid of your power mower and lawn edger. You'll find that there are other tools such as a hoe you will not use much anymore.

Water-wise plants tend to be less susceptible to diseases and harmful insects. Therefore pesticides can be eliminated. When this is done butterflies, bees, birds, hummingbirds, lizards, and other beneficial critters will come into your yard.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Go out and sit in the yard frequently to admire it as well as note what can be done to keep it beautiful.



This is the job I enjoy most: I'll take a cup of tea and go sit in the yard and look. Where are the weeds? What shrub or tree could stand a little trimming? I try to do this weekly if not more often.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Test run each irrigation zone and visually inspect sprinklers, soaker hoses, and or drip emitters. Make repairs as necessary.

Make sure your sprinklers are not watering the street, sidewalk, or driveway. I see this so often in my walks around the neighborhood. Plastic hoses and or drip lines can get chewed by critters. Make sure the emitters are where they need to be. I suggest doing this monthly.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Apply mulch as required

Try to keep your organic mulch between 2-6 inches deep, I use leaves and trimmings from trees and shrubs. Whenever I trim I will put the trimmings somewhere in the landscape. One caution: don't put mulch too close to the trunk of a tree or shrub.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Weed. With thick mulch and less water this task is made relatively easy and infrequent.

I use an asparagus fork primarily. Maybe once a month in the summer and every two months in the winter.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Some perennials and grasses may have to be replaced occasionally.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Deadhead blooms monthly or as required.

Deadheading results in more flower production as energy doesn't go into seed production.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Cut back some perennials annually

▶ Before



After



This is a salvia or sage that I recently cut back

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Trim grasses annually
- ▶ Miscanthus Before



After



Sunset Western Gardens book says to cut this back to the ground. I didn't go that far. Sunset also suggests this grass can be divided.

MAINTENANCE TASKS

- ▶ Trim trees as required





When preparing this talk I tried to figure out if I spent less time maintaining the new yard. I've come to the conclusion that I now spend more time in my yard than before although I probably do less hands-on maintenance. I just enjoy being in the yard.

REFERENCES

- ▶ California Master Gardener Handbook, University of California Publication 3382, 2002
- ▶ Sustainable Landscape for Dummies, Owen E. Dell, Wiley Publishing Co. 2009
- ▶ California Native Plants for the Garden, Carol Bornstein, et al, Cachuma Press, 2005
- ▶ Western Garden Book, Sunset Publishing Corp. 2007
- ▶ Tree Care 101, Presentation, Dr. James Downer, UCCE, Jan 2015
- ▶

I have three olive clumps and three strawberry trees. I want to keep them in scale with the yard. I do not want them to get so tall that I would have to use a ladder to prune. I like the looks of multiple-trunk trees but if they get large they aren't as safe as a single trunk tree in that a trunk could split off and fall in a wind. Every very six months I thin and prune these trees. I try not to butcher them but try to give them a natural look. My plan is to keep them large shrub size. By trimming fairly often, branches removed are small leaving small wounds that tend to heal quickly.

SUMMARY

- ▶ A well designed and maintained water-wise yard can be more attractive than a “traditional” yard, i.e. one with turf grass.
- ▶ However, it is not maintenance free.
- ▶ With proper selection of plants and liberal use of mulch maintenance can be less than that required for a traditional yard.

