



So You're Going on Vacation! What's Going to Happen to Your Plants?

By Laurel Rady

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

For the avid gardener, being away from home can be an anxious time -- because who's going to take care of your plants? Here are some tips to help make your absence less stressful, and your return home happier.

Determine which plants can tolerate most temperatures, and which are damaged by extremes of heat or cold. If possible before your departure, move tender plants out of the afternoon sun in summer, protect them from freezing by covering them with frost cloth in winter, or bring them inside if you can.

Check your irrigation system to ensure that an irrigation line goes to every plant that needs one, that all lines and emitters are working, and that your timer delivers the right amount of water on the correct number of days. If you have plants that need to be hand watered, know which require frequent watering and which can tolerate less. If possible, group those that need frequent watering together, out of extreme afternoon sunlight.

Learn which plants do best if they get no direct sun, which prefer morning light, and which can stand up to powerful afternoon rays. If possible, move them to their safest locations for sun tolerance. If you are not sure how much sun a plant can tolerate, make sure it is in an ambient-light or morning-light location only.

Have a friend or neighbor care for your plants while you are gone. Set up a regular care schedule. Prepare clear written instructions, and a "map" identifying which plants need what. Ask two or more people to team up and work together -- this usually increase the chances of success. Do several practice run-throughs, allowing the caretaker to do the watering, so they become familiar and comfortable with your needs and expectations. Allow time for questions. Make sure the caretaker knows how much water to give to each kind of plant (if in doubt, less is usually safer than more). If possible, prepare a video that clearly demonstrates what to do.

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If the caretaker is unsure of whether a plant needs water, ask them to stick a finger into the soil. If the soil is moist, the plant needs no additional water that day. If the soil is really dry, a little water probably won't hurt. The most common error is overwatering. Wilted, droopy leaves are usually a sign that the plant could use a bit of water. If the leaves are yellowing, the plant might be getting too much.

Prune back overgrown plants, deadhead spent flowers, and fertilize right before departure. The plants will grow back while you are gone, and you will return to a rejuvenated garden. If you have flowers that are just about to bloom, cut them and make a bouquet for the caretaker. It will be a lovely surprise. You can also ask the caretaker to check your property while they are there.

Be prepared for at least a bit of plant loss, especially if you will be gone for a long time. The more realistic your expectations, the less disappointed you will be when you return. If you find that some plants are not what they were, don't panic. Most plants are remarkably resilient, and recovery is often possible. If a plant does not survive, one that is better suited to your particular conditions or something tried-and-true might be a good replacement choice.

Better preparation creates better results!

No classes are scheduled for the coming weekend, but the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public on the first and second Saturdays of each month from 9 a.m. to 12 noon, throughout the winter. This Saturday volunteers will be on hand in the vegetable garden to answer questions about cold frames and other season extenders.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.