

March, 2020



Precious Water, Precious Plants

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We all know what's coming: hotter days, higher water bills, and less water to go around. What can a gardener do? Well, actually, quite a lot -- and this is the perfect time to start.

There are three main elements to any landscape: hardscape, plants, and irrigation. The hardscape includes your house, garage, driveway, pathways, pool, patio, dry stream beds -- anything permanent that has nothing planted on it. Hardscape is often overlooked when considering a landscape plan, but it's important. On the plus side, hardscape elements reduce your planted area and subsequent irrigation water use. But they also reflect heat into the garden, increase temperatures, and can cause runoff and erosion during the rainy season.

There are many good ways to handle the cons. Impermeable surfaces can be graded and slotted to drain water and to slow and direct runoff; walkways can be constructed from decomposed granite, stepping stones or bark, so that more water is absorbed into your soil for use by plants. During the rainy season, the water that falls onto the roof of your house and garage can be directed from downspouts into a collection barrel or a drain that spreads it across your property or into planted areas. Make sure that the plants located there can handle some extra water -- it takes only three days of sitting in water for roots to rot.

Determine your soil type (clay, sand, silt, loam, or a combination) so you know how quickly water moves through that soil and what nutrients it might need. If necessary, amend your soil with good compost so your plants will flourish. A bit of research and the application of what you learn can produce surprising results. Reduce the amount of turf on your property and replace it with smart, sustainable choices.

Select your plants carefully, based on your climate zone (USDA Cold Hardiness Zone or Sunset Western Garden Zone); intended use (shelter, privacy, decoration, bird or butterfly habitats, food, flowers); sun exposure (shade, morning light, full sun between noon and six, or a combination); and water needs (drought-tolerant or low-water-use, if possible). Do a little research on plants you like. Before buying, make sure they are truly "water wise" and suited to the spot you intend for them. Don't purchase anything that harbors insects or has diseased or damaged leaves.

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Place plants with similar water needs in the same area. Plants at the bottom of a slope get more water, and those at the top get less. Plants of all sizes need less water once they are established. Mulch keeps plants cool and conserves water. Keep mulch a few inches away from the base of plants and trees, and make sure it is between 3 and 4 inches deep, so weeds are discouraged but water can penetrate.

Several times a year, assess your irrigation system. Planted areas with different water needs should be irrigated with different valves, so no area gets too much or too little. Make sure your irrigation system is set up correctly and checked periodically. Test to make sure every plant is getting the correct amount of water. Do not apply water faster than the soil can absorb it. Consider watering a little less -- you probably can!

Experts estimate that regular water restrictions could begin as early as 2020. The smart gardener will implement an effective, water-wise system now, and start getting plants established, instead of having to apply emergency measures later on. Get a good system in place -- you'll be glad you did! Ready to get started? Here are some useful resources:

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County (www.mgeldorado.ucanr.edu)

El Dorado Irrigation District (www.eid.org)

UC Davis Arboretum All Stars (www.arboretu.ucdavis.edu)

In response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) and recent California Department of Public Health and El Dorado County Health & Human Services guidelines, UCCE Central Sierra will cancel all El Dorado and Amador County Master Gardener public events and classes. This cancellation remains in effect through May 10th, and will be updated as public health guidelines change.

We realize our public classes are valued by County residents and we especially appreciate your continued support and understanding during this public health challenge. We will attempt to offer our cancelled classes and events at a future time if feasible; please refer to our website <http://ucanr.edu/edmg> which will be updated with the latest changes as they occur.

Stay safe and follow recommended health and sanitation practices in the coming weeks.

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.