

## Sustainability Strategies for Gardeners

by Marlys Bell

In recent conversations about gardening, someone said she used to have a great vegetable garden with beautiful tomatoes, peppers and more zucchini than she could eat. But recently, her garden produced less and less. Finally, she realized that nutrients were depleted, and the soil needed regular replenishment with amendments such as manure, compost and nitrogen. To sustain the soil, she needed to put in as much as was taken out by the plants. By taking this simple step, she moved from depleting natural resources to replenishing them, a practice consistent with sustainability concepts. It helps her get a better yield from her garden while returning life and productivity to the soil.

University of California Master Gardeners promote sustainable gardening practices. To be sustainable means to pursue an activity indefinitely with minimal impact on the environment. This means protecting water quality and availability, soil, energy resources, wildlife habitat and fire risks. For more information, check the University of California Garden Web site: <http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/index.cfm> For a wider overview of

Many typical gardening practices have environmental consequences. For example:

- Herbicides and pesticides can kill or harm beneficial insects, critters, wildlife.
- Residue running into lakes, rivers and streams threatens the water supply.
- High nitrogen fertilizers ending up in lakes and streams produce algae.
- Unprotected soil becomes sediment in storm drains, lakes or streams.

Some sustainability issues arise from timing, inaction or missed opportunities. For example:

- When it is time to activate irrigation systems, instead of just setting the timer to 5:00 a.m.—when geysers will never be seen and corrected—first check the system for efficiency and effectiveness.
- In the fall, plant deciduous trees near south or western facing windows to reduce heat build-up and energy costs.
- Eliminate any invasive plants before they set seed.

Many sustainable gardening practices may mean actually doing less rather than more:

- Fertilizer should not be applied routinely, only when clearly needed by the plant.
- Grass clippings can be left on the ground to decay and add nitrogen to the soil.
- Cover the soil with mulch to reduce weeds and cool the soil, using less water.
- Compost to keep green waste on the property, reduce waste disposal costs and create nutrients for plants needing them.
- Select plants that attract bees, birds and other beneficial critters.

Individuals interested in learning more about sustainable gardening practices should visit the MG Demonstration Garden at 521 S. Barretta Street in Sonora by the Cassina High Dome on Open Garden Days, the first Saturday of each month from February to November. Each Open Garden Day features free talks on specific topics starting at 10:30 a.m. Those with other specific questions can also contact the Tuolumne County MG Hotline at 533-5912.

*Marlys Bell is an honorary University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who has designed her property to demonstrate sustainable living.*

*UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: [http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master\\_Gardeners/](http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/) You can also find us on Facebook.*