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Survival Mode

During this epic drought, even veteran and expert gardeners are having to make some tough choices

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Suzanne Clarke has been paring back her water use for years. She killed her lawn eight years ago during the last drought, and her gardening now is all in service to wildlife.

The rainfall this year has been one-third of the average. That follows the 2019-2020 season, the third-driest in 127 years in the Russian River watershed. And gardeners like Clarke, who already have taken measures to make their gardens more in tune with California's summer dry climate, are running out of new tricks to save water. Some are making hard decisions about what plants and trees to water and what to let die or leave to Lady Luck, holding out hope they might survive the deprivation of a second year of severe drought. And some are ruthlessly re-evaluating — even uprooting — cottage garden staples they have been slow to let go of.

"Climate change is here, and I'm hoping it's not too late," said Clarke, a Sonoma County Master Gardener and president of the Petaluma Garden Club.

"The situation with the weather in California is just so desperate. How can I keep my irrigation on when there is not enough water for cows and for agriculture? But I hope (farmers are) also taking water-saving measures."

Already a saver, Clarke has taken a further step this year by cutting back plants as much as she can so they will require less water.

"Not drastically, because you should never take off more than 30% or you'll kill it. But I'm reducing them in size so they'll use less water," she said. "I've cut down my salvia, my manzanitas, which don't use much water anyway. I've cut down my lavender and pineapple guava. The smaller the plant the less water they need."

Clarke makes sure the plants and trees she does have are serving a greater purpose besides just making her landscape look pretty. Her urban garden outside her Victorian home in the heart of old Petaluma is filled with plants that earn their rent by providing nectar or habitat for egg-laying birds and butterflies and bees. She's also evicted all her weeds so her precious water goes only to worthwhile plants.

She keeps curtailing her irrigation. From 15 minutes three times a week, she reduced it to 10 minutes three days a week and then 10 minutes two times a week. “And now I turned it right off. To see how they do. But I have every expectation they’ll be fine.”

Everything is heavily composted and mulched to help keep the soil moist for as long as possible. She turned off her ornamental fountain in front but she keeps one full in the back because birds and pollinators need something to drink.

Setting priorities

Avid rosarian Barbara Ellis said she simply never switched over to her summer watering schedule. She’s using as much water now as she did in the winter. But she has set her priorities. Her roses come first.

“I have an Australian tree; its leaves look pretty bad,” she said. “Even the Euphorbia is looking kind of like, ‘Can you give me a little more water?’ But my roses look fantastic.”

Some plants near the roses have reaped the benefits of that prime real estate.

Ellis has about 15 roses, a far cry from the 250 she once proudly tended in Forestville before she downsized to a tract house in the oldest section of Rohnert Park. She has held off planting in her backyard because of the severe drought. Young plantings need extra watering until their roots can establish.

“Literally, I’m at the point where all I need to do is put plants in. I see no point in doing it until we see if we have some good rain this year,” she said.

Like many a passionate gardener, Ellis, who is president of the Redwood Empire Rose Society, said she’d rather cut down on her household water than endanger her roses. She has been through this before. She recalls the being a young mother in 1976-77 when the North Bay suffered through its driest year on record. That year Santa Rosa received only 9.47 inches of rain. The average is 32.2 inches of rainfall a year.

“I’ll not wash a load of clothes,” she said. “I’ll go 10 days instead of seven before changing my sheets.”

Just say no

Some gardeners who haven’t taken the more extreme measures of killing their lawns or getting rid of favorite water-loving plants like hydrangeas are approaching a moment of reckoning.

Karen Devine lives in Cloverdale, where residents are under mandatory 35% water reduction orders. She loves cheerful summer flowers, but this year she decided against planting annuals. And after struggling to keep every tomato plant alive with water from the shower and kitchen sink, she ripped out six and kept two.

She's been fighting to save her camellia and two Bloodgood maples. But the fight is getting harder and harder.

One thing Devine has been unable to come to terms with is letting go of her lawn. She's already converted her sprinkler system to a pressure-reducing system with rotating heads that won't spit out a lot of spray that will then dissipate in the air. She said she knows getting rid of the lawn is the right thing to do. But as an East Coast native used to the soft and cooling green carpet of grass in a yard, she's resisted taking the plunge. The new sprinklers are a step.

"I'm hoping it will be a big improvement," she said. "It saves about 30%. We were watering every other day. Now we're watering three times a week."

And, she said, "I'm finally giving up on my hydrangea. I'm done. I've tried every year. It's going. It's not in the right spot. It gets the later afternoon sun. It's been cut back completely. I'll probably pull it out in January."

Fun has dried up

The drought also has dried up much of the fun for North Bay gardeners who get some of their greatest enjoyment from working the soil. And with the pandemic shutting down travel and entertainment, gardening was one joy they could indulge with no risk.

"I'd rather be outside gardening than probably anything else. It's very therapeutic for me," said Devine, who is a member of the Cloverdale Green Thumb Garden Club. But even many club members didn't buy plants at their annual sale, knowing it's just not the year.

"I'm sad about it all. I'm sad we have this problem," Devine said. "And I'm sad that I can't plant more flowers. I'm sad for the nurseries that are suffering. I do look at my lawn and it makes me sad."

Melinda Wolcott, president of the Healdsburg Garden Club, said a lot of people are letting lawns go, installing graywater systems and turning their gardens over to succulent and drought-tolerant plants.

"They're sort of doing a triage as to what they're planning to keep," she said.

Even those who have wells, like herself, are careful, not wanting to strain the aquifer.

"I've taken out some roses, and I tried to plant ground covers that will keep the moisture in and that don't need a lot of water themselves, like lamb's ears." Wolcott has tried to carefully figure out just how little water her plants can take and still survive.

She has a lot of plants that don't require much water, like echinacea, yarrow, manzanita and grass. But so many dreams are being deflated or deferred.

"You put in a garden and you worry about what's going to happen to it if it doesn't have water," she lamented. "It's depressing."

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