

Water-wise Landscaping

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WATER-EFFICIENT GARDENS STILL NOT CONVINCED?

Do you think water-efficient landscape means a dry, uninteresting landscape? Hopefully you read the article about this landscaping technique in *Issue 1*.

Water-efficient landscape employs several design techniques to fulfill its promise of water-wise, resource-efficient, and eye-appealing landscapes. Adding water features, patios, and walkways, irrigating efficiently, placing plants with like cultural requirements together, using plants with higher water requirements in an effective but limited manner, limiting turf grass areas, and using mulches are all part of water-efficient landscape.

Here are the answers to some common misconceptions and questions about water-efficient landscape.

I have an established landscape that I enjoy. Can I still use water-efficient landscape principles?

Yes. You can make sure that your irrigation system is operating correctly, that leaks are promptly repaired, and that the amount of water delivered during irrigation is consistent with seasonal needs.

The use of



proper pruning and mowing techniques, coupled with applications of mulch to help conserve soil moisture, are all water-efficient landscape techniques.

I have heard that only certain plants can be used in water-efficient landscape and that I shouldn't plant azaleas. Is this true?

No! Any plant can work in this type of landscape as long as it is in its appropriate environment. Water-efficient landscape principles and proper plant selection guidelines recommend that when selecting plants for your landscape you always consider the existing characteristics of the intended plant location. If you want to plant azaleas, for example, select a location that offers some shade; acidic soil that is moist, well drained, and rich in organic matter. Place together plants with similar water needs. Water-efficient landscape designs include limited use of high water plants aggregated in focal areas of the landscape.

I want to use native plants in my landscape. How do they work with water-efficient landscape?

Native plants that grow in your area are generally good choices in a water-efficient landscape design because they are acclimated to the environment. Native plants that need little summer water, once established, are good

selections for the outer areas of the landscape. As mentioned in the answer above, consider the cultural characteristics of each plant before selecting a planting location. Many native plants, for example, require good drainage and won't thrive in heavy, clay soils.

I like the idea of using mulch in my planting beds because of its many benefits. What kinds of mulches are available?

First, consider composting your yard waste. Composting provides a good source of mulch and reduces landfill levels. Nurseries and landscape material suppliers sell mulch in bags or bulk. Many local programs, such as fire safety and air quality control, have chipping programs. Although not as beneficial to the landscape as organic mulches, inorganics, such as stone, cloth, and plastic, are an option.

I want to set my automatic irrigation system timer. How do I know how often to water the lawn?

Lawns perform best when they receive regular (two to three times per week), deep watering. Generally, lawns can use 1 to 1 ½ inches of water a week in hot, dry weather and about ½ to ¾ inches in cooler months, if it hasn't rained. The irrigation system can be turned off during rainy seasons. Watering time is, of course, dependent on the amount of water your system

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delivers per hour. Irrigation suppliers, nurseries, and your local Cooperative Extension office have information on how to determine watering times for your irrigation system. Water your lawn as the soil begins to dry out but before the grass wilts. Irrigate in the morning before 10:00 a.m.

Water-efficient landscape principles also talk about regular maintenance, which, for me, includes some mowing. How often should I mow my grass and how high should I set the blade?

When mowing your lawn, set the mower blade to cut to a height of 3 inches. If you mow lower, a shallow root system can develop because the grass blades are not large enough to provide necessary nutrients to the roots. Grass with a shallow root system is more susceptible to pests and drought. Remove about 1 inch of grass each time you mow. One inch of grass quickly decomposes and returns nutrients to the soil – so you don't have to collect the clippings. If you do not wish to leave the clippings or use a mulching mower, remember that grass clippings are an excellent source of "greens" for the compost pile.

I like the idea of saving water

through creative landscaping; however, I live in a community with deed restrictions that specify how much grass and what type of plants to use. What should I do?

You can use water-efficient landscape principles in planning, designing and maintaining your landscape. However, local requirements may restrict your flexibility in selecting plants for an optimal design.

Principles, such as planning and maintaining an efficient irrigation system, become more important in your situation. You may consider working with your community to amend the existing requirements to allow for creativity, efficiency, and conservation of resources. The UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners can provide information and are available to speak to groups about resource-efficient landscaping.

I'm looking forward to establishing my water-efficient landscape so that I can eliminate yard work.

Water-efficient landscapes require a lot less maintenance than traditional landscapes, but no landscape is maintenance free. By applying water-efficient landscape principles, such as putting the right plant in the right

place and irrigating plants as needed, the landscape is no longer one giant entity in which every plant gets the same care. You add nutrients and water only when they're needed. You treat damage or disease only when and where it's required. In this way, you reduce the amount of money you spend on fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, and irrigation. Regular maintenance, such as pruning, mowing, and checking the irrigation system, is important for the health of any landscape.



Want more information? Still have some questions? Contact your local U.C. Cooperative Extension office and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. We love to talk gardening.

References

California Master Gardener Handbook. 2002. UC ANR Publication 3382.

Xeriscape Principles. Southwest Florida Water Management District. www.swfmd.state.fl.us

Resources

Placer County Water Agency
<http://www.pcwa.com>

Water Wise Gardens of California
<http://www.usbr.gov/mp/watershare/>

Water Education Foundation
<http://www.water-ed.org>

Water Saver Home
<http://www.h2ouse.org>



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