



How to get a Drought Tolerant Garden Established

Drought tolerant or “water-wise” gardens can be beautiful, productive and rewarding, while reducing water consumption, and are recommended for Sonoma County’s Mediterranean climate, even when we are not experiencing drought conditions. Now is the time to get started—with the planning, but not the planting. Planting should be done in the fall, to take advantage of the shorter, cooler days, and the winter rains that will help the plants get established. Follow these tips, and by next spring, you will begin to see the fruits of your labor.

Whether you are creating a new garden or working with the one you already have, it is useful to sketch out the different areas of your garden. To reduce water usage, put plants with similar water needs together. Areas that use the most water are typically vegetable gardens, cutting gardens and lawns. Your sketch should show where you want plants vs. paths, patios and other hardscape features. It should also show existing trees and other plants that you intend to keep. Be sure to indicate where you may also want to have planters or containers of plants that can be served with drip irrigation lines.

Once you’ve sketched out a picture of your garden, spend some time thinking about what plants you really want to have there. Do you want a vegetable garden? If so, what size will be best for your needs? Although vegetables take quite a bit of water, they also provide a terrific payback. Fruit trees also offer a big bang for the buck by providing ornamental flowers in spring, fruit in summer and foliage color in autumn. Do you want a cutting garden? Showy, cut-flowers can be water hogs, so if they are a “must” for your garden, you may want to consider planting them among or near your vegetables. By clustering plants with similar water requirements, you can achieve the garden that you want, while ensuring that water is not wasted in areas where it is not needed. Instead of putting in a lawn, consider some of the interesting [lawn alternatives](#) and ground covers. The average lawn uses between 35,000 and 50,000 gallons of water a year! If you currently have a lawn, you may want to consider removing it or at least cutting it back. Some cities in Sonoma County offer water conservation rebates and “cash for grass” programs. Check with your city to see if you are eligible to participate.

Take a look at the Demonstration Garden here at the County Fair to see how lush and interesting a drought tolerant garden can be and pick up a copy of the Master Gardeners list of [Drought Tolerant Plants for Sonoma County](#). Visit nurseries and research the wide variety of drought tolerant and native plants available. They come in all shapes and sizes and offer a broad

selection of textures and colors to experiment with in the garden. Find the ones you like and then talk with the staff and make sure the plants you want will work in the environment you have. If you have a lot of shade, you'll want plants that do well in dry shade. If you get a lot of wind, check to be sure the plants you want will survive in windy areas. Look on-line for information on the plants you like. Visit the Master Gardeners website, www.sonomamastergardeners.org for photos and informative articles on drought tolerant and native plants and water-wise gardens. Be sure to check out the size of the plant to be sure it will work in the space you've chosen. It takes a lot of work to keep a plant pruned back. If you really like it, check to see if there are dwarf cultivars that you can use instead.

Late summer is also a good time to complete any hardscape features before you actually begin to put plants into the ground in the fall. Next, plan and it's also a good time to install or adjust your drip irrigation system. Although you are establishing a drought tolerant garden, you should plan to irrigate even the most xeric plants for the first two years until they have developed a good root system and can support themselves on reduced water. By grouping plants with similar water needs together, you can cut down on the amount irrigation line needed and on the amount of water used

In September or October just before you purchase the plants you have selected, prepare the ground by amending the soil with compost. When planting, be sure to space the plants properly so they do not compete with each other for root space, water or nutrients. After planting, mulch your garden, not only to suppress weeds, but also to retain moisture, control erosion and modify soil temperature, keeping plant roots cool in the summer and warm in the winter. A 2" to 3" layer of mulch is more than sufficient for most areas of your garden. Water your new plants immediately after planting, and check them daily for the first week or so, particularly if the rainy season is delayed. Once the rains begin, don't forget to turn your irrigation system off. At least for the winter, you can let nature take over the irrigation task for the most part.

By next spring your water-wise garden will begin to show its stuff! You can adjust your watering schedule based on the time of year and the amount of moisture in the ground. Do not water your plants unless they need it, and be sure to water wisely—early in the morning before the heat of the day to minimize evaporation. Weed your garden frequently in the spring to keep down the competition for water and nutrients. Finally, and most important, enjoy the beautiful water-wise garden you have created!