

Being water wise during summer

June 14, 2012, 05:00 AM By Joan Tharp



Summer officially arrives next week, which means rain will be on vacation until the fall.

Throughout the year, but especially during the summer, smart and thrifty gardeners make water-wise choices in designing, installing and maintaining their lawns and gardens. A lawn or garden that requires little or no water during the summer costs less and is easier to maintain than its more thirsty counterpart. And who wouldn't rather have more cash and time to spend outside?

Here are some tips and resources for creating and maintaining a water-wise outdoor space.

Design

Summer isn't the time to plant, but it is a good time to think about ways to make your lawn and garden work better for you and be more water wise. One weekend when you're relaxing outside, look around at the space and plants that you have, and think about how well they work for you. Could a sunny spot be turned into a raised-bed vegetable garden? Could you turn part of the lawn into more deck space for entertaining?

Considering and reconsidering the lawn

Speaking of lawns ... It takes a lot of time, effort, water and resources to maintain turf. In fact, a lawn almost always is the biggest user of water in the home landscape. Do you use your lawn enough to justify the time and money you spend on its maintenance? You might want to consider having turf only where you actually use it: a patch for the kids to play on or only in the area in which you entertain.

Water your lawn for no more than five minutes a day. In the summer, do it every other day. Also, don't cut your grass too short. Taller grass needs less water and grows more slowly.

Plant selection and placement

Something to ponder now and do in the fall and winter is selecting plants that require little water and suit your garden's conditions. California natives, such as Ceanothus and the California poppy, are a great choice because they are built to last through dry summers.

Group plants that like the same conditions. Don't stick a moisture-loving rhododendron next to a water-sipping Hollywood Juniper. If you fall in love with a fern but want to keep your landscape drought-tolerant, consider planting it in a pot and hand watering it.

Water efficiently and correctly

Give plants only as much water as they need each month, adjusting for seasonal changes and the conditions in your landscape. The amount and frequency of watering depends on the type of soil you have, how much wind and sun you get, the ages of your plants and other factors. Infrequent and deep watering generally is much better than daily spritzing. Deep watering stimulates root growth in your plants and helps them better cope with changes in soil moisture.

The Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency (BAWSCA) recommends watering between the hours of 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. because there is minimal chance of evaporation during those hours.

How do you know when to water? With practice, you can eyeball a plant and know whether it needs more or less water. You also can use a moisture meter, which you stick in the ground to get a reading on the level of moisture in the soil. You should water only when the soil is dry about one to two inches below the ground surface.

Some plants become susceptible to diseases, such as powdery mildew, when water remains on their leaves for too long. To minimize problems, water in the early morning, or water plants at ground level.

Mulch, mulch, mulch

A thick layer of mulch (several inches) around plants insulates the soil, reduces evaporation, keeps soil temperature consistent, blocks weeds from growing and protects plants' roots from heat in the summer. Keep mulch several inches away from the trunks of shrubs and trees. Check underneath the mulch now and then to make sure water is reaching the soil and plant roots.

Want to know more about water-wise gardening?

BAWSCA's website has terrific information about how to be water wise, including a suggested seasonal watering schedule for mid-Peninsula and coastal residents. It also has great photos of local water-wise gardens. Each photo includes descriptions of some of the plants used in that garden.

You also can see and wander through local water-wise gardens by attending the June 23 San Mateo/San Francisco Master Gardener program's 2012 Garden Tour. You can talk to the garden designers and ask questions of Master Gardeners who will be on hand at each garden.

Joan Tharp is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener. She lives in San Mateo. She can be reached at news@smdailyjournal.com.

Come to the 2012 Master Gardener Educational Garden Tour sponsored by Master Gardeners of San Mateo and San Francisco counties. The tour of water-wise Peninsula gardens is 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., June 23. Tickets are \$20. Visit the Master Gardener website for more information at <http://smsf-mastergardeners.ucanr.org>.

Learn about water-wise gardening by visiting the Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency's website at www.bawsca.watersavingsplants.com.