

Your Watershed
By the Russian River Watershed Association

Gardening with Water-Thrifty Plants

Gardeners in coastal California are in luck. We can grow a tremendous variety of ornamental plants, and we can do it with very little water. The key is to know which plants are water thrifty, and which ones are thirsty. Making the right choice from the start creates a garden that requires one-third the amount of water that lawn requires – or even less! Since 40-50% of residential water use is in gardens, choosing plants with water use in mind has the potential to significantly reduce our water use, individually and regionally. By reducing water use in your garden, you also reduce runoff from over-watering or “gutter flooding”. Runoff can carry the pollutants it contacts, such as pesticides, into storm drains and then into creeks and streams.

We live in a “Mediterranean climate” which has cool wet winters and warm dry summers. Because we typically have little if any rain from May to October (the growing season for plants) we irrigate our gardens. In our climate, thirsty plants require about 36” of applied irrigation each year. Luckily, most plants from our native flora, as well as plants from other Mediterranean climates worldwide, require no more than 12” of applied water each year. These “low water use plants” can fill any garden niche from cutting garden, to shade tree, to hedgerow.

Here are some ways these unthirsty plants can populate our gardens.

- Deciduous shade trees for yards or streetscapes – Chinese Pistache (*Pistachia chinensis*) with intense red and orange fall color; Crepe Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia*) with vibrant late-summer flowers and striking bark; or Maidenhair Tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) with incomparable yellow fall leaves.
- Flowering shrubs – Red-flowering Currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), one of our most striking California natives with pink to red flower in early spring; summer flowering Rockrose (*Cistus*) from southern Europe; or one of the many Lavenders (*Lavandula*) which flower from spring through summer.
- Cut flowers – *Penstemon* in red, pink or blue; Yarrow (*Achillea*) with white, yellow or crimson colors; any of the many varieties of Daffodil (*Narcissus*); deep yellow *Coreopsis*; and the mid-summer flowering South African bulb Montbretia (*Crocasmia*) in orange and red.
- Formal hedges – Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), a wonderful dark green substitute for the more thirsty boxwood; Lavender Cotton (*Santolina*) for a low grey or dark green fine-textured hedge; and Italian Buckthorn (*Rhamnus alaternus*) for taller hedges, either sheared or unsheared.
- Edible landscapes – any variety of Plum (*Prunus*) or Persimmon (*Diosporus*); table or wine varieties of Grape (*Vitis*); Pomegranate (*Punica*); Olive (*Olea*); and the South American shrub Pineapple Guava (*Feijoa sellowiana*), with edible flowers and fruit.

- Herb gardens – either prostrate or upright Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*); culinary Sage (*Salvia officinalis*); any variety of Thyme (*Thymus*); and the evergreen European shrub or tree, Sweet Bay (*Laurus nobilis*).
- Wildlife gardens – Butterfly Bush (*Buddleja*) with striking summer flower; Coyote Bush (*Baccharis pilularis*), a native which hosts numerous beneficial insects; and Pacific Wax Myrtle (*Myrica californica*) which birds flock to for the tiny waxy berries.

Thanks to the University of California Cooperative Extension, we have a resource that lists the “water appetite” of virtually all garden plants - the *Water Use Classification of Landscape Species* (WUCOLS) report. WUCOLS includes a comprehensive index of landscape plants commonly available in California, and classifies these plants as either High Water Use (needing 36” or more of applied water in our climate), Moderate Water Use (needing about 24” in our climate), Low Water Use (the 12” water appetite plants) or Very Low Water Use (using even less than 12”). This classification is carried out for six regions of California. Sonoma and Mendocino Counties are in the North Central Coast, or Region 1. To access the full WUCOLS report, go to the California Department of Water Resources, Office of Water Use Efficiency web site (www.owue.water.ca.gov/) and search for WUCOLS. The index of plants begins on page 62 of the report.

As we introduce low water use plants into the garden, remember to group them together so they can be watered according to their water appetite. Consider installing efficient drip irrigation which most of these plants prefer to conventional spray irrigation. The result will be both beautiful and water efficient – a real win!

The Russian River Watershed Association (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of eleven cities, counties and special districts in the watershed that are working together on programs for clean water, fisheries restoration and watershed enhancement.