



Russian River Watershed Association

300 Seminary Ave, Ukiah, CA 95482 • (707)833-2553 • www.rrwatershed.org

RRWA Environmental Column – May 2015 A Healthier Way to Manage your Garden

We work hard to keep our gardens looking beautiful, so when we find our plants in distress it is hard to resist the temptation to head to the store and grab any product that promises to restore the garden's beauty. While many people consider pesticides and fertilizers as a quick solution, they are not the safest options for our health nor for the environment. Pesticides are used for controlling weeds and insects because they are poisonous to a wide variety of living organisms and hence, are toxic. When these chemicals are applied, they are not just exposed to the pests you are trying to eradicate, but also to the surrounding environment. This means the people and pets that play or work in that area, the food that is grown in that area, and the water that drains to creeks as runoff in that area can all be negatively affected. The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, tested over 9,000 people nationwide, and found traces of pesticides in 100% of people.

A program called Our Water Our World (OWOW) was recently implemented to assist consumers in managing home and garden pests in a way that is environmentally friendly. OWOW has partnered with local retail stores to make less toxic products more available to consumers and to help you make the best decision for your garden. Before deciding on a course of action for your garden, here are a few things to think about and resources that may help.

Is this where your plant belongs?

One of the most important measures to prevent distress in plants is selecting appropriate plants based on the particular location of growing. Proper gardening includes comparing soil, temperature, shade, and water needs of the plant, to what is actually offered by the site where the plant will grow. It is both easier and healthier to grow plants that are compatible to your site than to try to alter the growing conditions.

Are your plants getting watered properly?

Plants can be pretty picky drinkers. They can show signs of distress both when they are getting too much water and too little water. You can get an idea of what the water needs are for your particular plants by visiting http://ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS/Plant_Search/ where plants are categorized as needing high, moderate, low, or very low amounts of water based on the specific location of your garden. One common gardening mistake is having water-thirsty plants next to water-thrifty plants, making it inefficient to water your garden. Once armed with the knowledge of how much water each plant needs, consider a practice called hydro-zoning where you group plants together according to their water appetites.

If you are looking to save water in the garden, consider adding organic mulch to all exposed soil areas. Mulch can keep water-thirsty weeds down, add a steady supply of nutrient-rich organic matter, and help stabilize soil temperature and moisture.

Do you have some nasty garden pests?



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If this is the case, you may want to visit the website of OWOW (<http://www.ourwaterourworld.org/>). OWOW has designed “Fact Sheets” that assist you in finding non-toxic and less-toxic solutions for managing pests. If you can’t find the answer you are looking for, just click on the Ask Our Expert link where you can enter your question and email to get a response within 24 hours.

How do you shop for more environmentally friendly products?

There are 15 retail nurseries and home improvement stores in the Russian River watershed that participate in the Our Water Our World Program. When you are out shopping for gardening products in local retail stores, keep an eye out for Fact Sheets and little signs placed in front of a product to help you identify those that are non-toxic or less toxic than their conventional counterparts. These little signs are affectionately called “shelf-talkers” and feature the Our Water Our World daisy, along with the name of the product above the proclamation “Choose less toxic products!” You can view a list of participating stores by county at: <http://www.ourwaterourworld.org/QuickLinks/StoreLocator.aspx>.



Try out these resources and proactive practices to get your garden looking its best while being mindful that your choices affect the health of people, pets, and your watershed.

This article was authored by Nazareth Tesfai of Sonoma County Water Agency, on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.