

Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

Designing for drought



Sedum illuminates with mustard yellow flowers. Photo Cynthia Brian

... continued from Page D1

Do not use human, dog, or cat feces. Don't disturb the lower levels of the ground to allow worms and micro-bacteria to do their jobs of aerating and feeding the earth. In a drought, double and triple digging techniques are not recommended.

3) Water well. To stay healthy, most plants need at least one inch of moisture per week. The best way to save your plants as well as conserve water is to water deeply and infrequently.

The penetration of the water encourages deeper roots that are more resistant to drought conditions. A good rule of thumb is to water until the dirt has a hint of shine. Lawns and bedding plants require a

drink to a depth of six inches while perennials, trees, and shrubs need closer to 12. Plan to irrigate either early in the morning or evening when absorption will be maximized, and evaporation minimized. Just as humans rejuvenate from a good night's rest, plants do most of their growing at night. Traditional overhead sprinklers can lose half of their effectiveness to evaporation, run-off, and overspray. Drip and soaker hoses are the best bets for deep soaking to the root zone. Soaker hoses may be covered with mulch making them invisible. When water is restricted prioritize rationing by watering, in this order, newly planted trees, shrubs, and perennials; newly seeded or repaired lawns; plants with exposure on windy sites or in sandy soils; and flowering vegetables.

4) Mulch. Three inches of mulch will insulate your plants from the heat, cold, and elements. Mulch keeps the ground cooler, maximizes water retention, reduces evaporation, and improves the appearance of your landscape. Mulch includes pine needles, straw, leaves, wood chips, bark, and even gravel. As it decomposes it becomes compost and enriches the soil. When that happens, it is time for a new top layer of the mulch of your choice.

5) Weed. Weeds steal moisture and nutrition from neighboring plants. Pull or cut down unwanted weeds.

6) Stop fertilizing. If you plan to fertilize this season, do it now while the weather is still cool, and dew is apparent. Feeding while it is raining is the best prescription for plant wellness. If you fertilize without sufficient water, the roots will burn, and the plants will die. Fertilizing encourages new growth and new growth will stress your already stressed specimens. As the weather warms, refrain from fertilizing again until rain is forthcoming.

7) Plant for drought. I'm a big believer in bulbs. In our temperate climate, you dig a hole, plant, forget, then be awed when bulbs pop up and bloom. Daffodils, calla lilies, freesia, hyacinths, Dutch iris, and many others are all excellent spring-blooming bulbs that require minimal care and reap huge bloom benefits. For summer flowering, plant gladiolus, Naked ladies, agapanthus, Asian lilies, tuberous begonias, dahlias, iris, and canna. Succulents offer a magnificent maintenance-free drought investment. Succulents come in many shapes, sizes, and colors with beautiful blooms and little water requirements. Sedums are spectacular as groundcovers or upright attracting bees and butterflies. Jade, echeveria, senecio, haworthias, aconium, and ice plant all have varied textures and attractive flowers. Unlike cactus, succulents don't have thorns, making them a favorite for rock gardens.

Don't forget to plant edibles. A small 4-foot by 8-foot bed can be planted with plenty of nutritious vegetables and herbs to feed a family of four. Decide what you enjoy eating and plant only those to avoid watering vegetables that you won't consume.

Surrounding me now is plenty of sunshine and within I feel sunny and bright. Yet, I'm counting on the luck of the Irish to bring a bit of Emerald Isle precipitation to the shores of California this St. Paddy's Day! In case there isn't that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, I'm designing for drought.