

Mediterranean Gardening: The Benefits & Challenges of Slim Rainfall

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Enjoy the pleasant dry atmosphere and pungent sturdy plants of Mediterranean areas! These plants are not water wimps: they live and have their being in their adaptive strengths. That same reduction of moisture that frees Mediterranean areas from insects, spoiled picnics or cancelled games, and generally produces the bright, benign, most pleasantly habitable areas on earth has also produced this special breed of plants. Enjoy them for their unique beauty and special characteristics.

Therefore, you may well want to design your garden featuring this palette of suitable plants, and will thus avoid the pitfalls of a garden that - heaven forbid! - tries to mimic wetter places on earth. A garden whose life depends on transporting copious quantities of water from somewhere else is not a garden of repose but a garden of struggle. It becomes ever more evident that our planet requires us to cease our quest to overcome natural systems - depleting them by struggling against them. We need to understand the benefits of working in concert with natural systems.

Beneath the threshold of the appropriate planting palette, lies another threshold more particular to many Mediterranean regions. The slight precipitation in these areas is not by nature spread out in even sequences, but occurs in mountainous lumps, with gaps in between. Several years of plentiful rainfall seem to be endless abundance, and will bring about a forgetful population. Municipal systems have reserve supplies, and yet - when an entire state goes dry for six or seven years - the unavoidable facts will come home to roost with every individual.

Keeping this extra understanding in mind then, always prepare mentally for a cyclic super drought (several years' duration at a time).

1. First and foremost: design it that way. I once crafted a garden for some seasoned Californians who had weathered several of our dry cycles. They stipulated that the plants inside their small inner courtyard could be year-round green and thirsty, but that the balance of plants on their property consist entirely of natives. This we did very successfully, even including a Zen-like garden with sycamores as trained Bonsai, creeping Manzanita carpeting the ground, and rock. The garden weathered very well, even over the long term.
2. Secondly, have an emergency plan in mind (when push comes to shove and there is no more water in sight): decide what is to be preserved, and what is to be let go - and be organized about it. Obviously, your mature majestic trees and specimen shrubs need priority; give them the staying power of a drip watering system to stave off possible stress. Smaller thirsty plants, especially lawns and annuals, are minor in cost and deserve rethinking about anyway once the dry cycle is completed.
3. Finally, use each of those cycles to balance your garden more towards an appropriate direction. You and your garden deserve to live stress-free!