

Not All Plants Are Equally Thirsty

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From *The Mediterranean Garden* No 8 Spring 1997

As never before, Mediterranean gardeners are faced with lack of water, not always due to summer drought. This may take newcomers by surprise. For my own garden, water being scarce has become a way of life. In summer, our water tank invariably runs dry with many weeks of drought to go. I remember how concerned I was when first faced with this uncomfortable situation and how I cried over the inevitable losses. Meanwhile, I have become confident since I know that my garden will survive. It has done so year after year, turning lusher as time goes by. An array of recipes lets it come through dry summers. Grouping plants according to their water needs is one of the prominent ones.

You will achieve important savings in water if you divide your garden into areas with high, moderate and low water needs. In each of these three areas you group plants with similar moisture requirements and rearrange those areas where drought-tolerant species have been planted next to thirsty ones. By giving your plants the right amount of water, you use the precious liquid where it is beneficial and avoid all unnecessary waste. You can also try to reduce the area with a high water use, especially if it is not essential to your garden. These simple guidelines, sometimes called hydrozoning, are worth gold to gardeners who have to make do with little water.

Many gardeners group their plants by leaf texture and flower color; they deliberate on height and the flowering period or enthuse about variegation. The specific quantity of water required by each is not always considered. However - even if water were not scarce - this is a crucial aspect.

Plants are frequently irrigated whether it suits them or not - maybe even with the thought 'the more the better'. But irrigation adversely affects those plants which prefer dry summers, for example the Mediterranean 'greys and silvers' or a range of Californian natives. These plants enter dormancy over summer and should be allowed to do so. But when water logging forces the air out of the soil, they asphyxiate as their non-operational roots rot.

On the other hand, bear in mind that, contrary to the above, plants such as *Canna indica* or angel's trumpets (*Brugmansia*), which come from regions where it rains in summer or year-long, continue absorbing water over summer. They will only thrive if given generous supplies.

When you divide your plantings into areas, remember that certain good-humored plants tolerate life in high- or low-watering zones alike - as long as they are planted according to their requirements. *Abelia* and *Escallonia*, for example, favor dappled shade and that is where they demand the least water. Other plants are less resilient and require specific doses. Providing plants with the water they really require promotes their health and is an important step in avoiding disease.

When you are considering grouping plants according to their water needs, remember that those which over the years have been given lavish watering (while in fact they needed little)

cannot be weaned from one day to the next. Their roots need time to adapt to foraging for water on their own - which may require two or three seasons.

Finding out the quantity of water that each plant really needs may call for a bit of research. Often experience helps: you know, for example, that lavender, rosemary and thyme are native to the Mediterranean where summers are dry. So why water them? My book, *Mediterranean Gardening, A Waterwise Approach*, lists several hundred plants which survive dry summers.

Often it is felt that a rich picture results only from plants which require, or are given, lavish watering. But this is not so. In the garden that I tend, watered and unwatered zones are alike in their colorful exuberance. It all depends on the right choice of plants which will give their best as long as they grow under conditions that suit them well. (This may mean sun or shade, protection from wind, above all generous mulching and well-draining soils.) Visualise a bed of mediterranean climate plants such as *Artemisia*, *Ballota*, many *Cistus*, *Coronilla*, *Euphorbia*, *Halimium*, *Helichrysum*, *Hypericum*, together with iris and countless sunny Cape bulbs. They look as good, sometimes even better, than thirsty plants with a high water use and, closely planted, give your garden a luxuriant, evergreen cover.

Even if one has all the water in the world, grouping the plants according to the water needs benefits the garden. This so-called hydrozoning facilitates, for example, the installation of watering equipment, since it is difficult to water correctly areas where plants with high and low water requirements live next to each other. Where feasible, all watering equipment should be installed *before* planting. Thus you know how far water reaches and can choose plants accordingly. Less expensive and easier to maintain, such gardens suit those who have little time at hand.

Three different groups are suggested, but your garden does not have to have all three. You may, for example, concentrate the water available to you on a small lawn (the high water area) and, to make up for such an 'extravagance', border this lawn with a no-watering area. You do not have to stick slavishly to the recommended areas. Design your groups to suit your water allowance, your own needs and those of your garden. The three water use areas which follow can be seen as an example.

The area with a low water use

This area needs the least water and suits a tight water budget. Here you use all those plants which do not require more than annual rainfall. However, apply additional water until newly planted vegetation has been established. Depending on the size of the specimen at planting time, this may mean a year or so. Remember that drought-tolerant plants require excellent drainage and good ventilation and that most thrive in sun.

Such plantings include a delightful variety of plants whose flowers and fragrance offer pleasure throughout the year. In my garden, I use for this section plants from all Mediterranean climate regions. Winter rain takes care of them and generally carries them through summer without further attention (remember summer dormancy?). Countless unthirsty plants such as *Bupleurum*, *Coronilla*, *Ceanothus*, *Cotoneaster*, *Cynara* or *Ruta* qualify to make up the non-irrigated section, for example, in a 'natural garden'. Most herbs thrive in this area. Or take advantage of the native vegetation found locally and reintroduce wild flowers. None of them requires summer water. This area could, but does not have to,

be situated furthest from the house. Plants on the borderline of your garden need not be as manicured, since mostly you see them from a distance. Should you desire a formal approach, clipped cypress, myrtle and lavender cotton offer themselves.

The area with a moderate water use

The second group includes those plants that need more water than rainfall supplies, but not much more. Depending on the conditions your garden offers and the plants you have chosen, this may mean (in the hottest months) a once to twice weekly watering. In my own garden, I fare well with a weekly summer watering for this zone and maybe an additional application after drying winds. Your own observation will help you to determine frequency and quantity for your own garden.

Many plants you may want to grow in this second group do not come from a summer-dry Mediterranean climate and require watering in summer (*Abutilon*, *Fatsia*, *Fuchsia*, *Hebe*, *Hosta*, *Phygelius*). Their healthy growth and attractive flowers do not lag behind those plants which demand ample supplies. Closely planted and generously mulched (to retain humidity in the soil), they will present a cheerful picture which may provide a link between a natural garden area and a thirsty, water intensive zone.

The area with a high water use

In this water-intensive area you grow plants which require the most water. These may come from tropical lands or from regions with summer rain (*Begonia*, *Camellia*, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, *Hydrangea*). It may also mean a lawn of moderate size, thirsty annuals, containers with exotics or a vegetable garden. Place your cherished high water plants next to the lawn and water them together with it for an intimate, luxuriant scene.

To take advantage of every drop of water, plant closely, mulch generously, and place where the least evaporation through wind and sun occurs. Diminishing the size of this zone trims down your water bill effectively. But whatever you decide on, use the water at your disposal how and where it will give you most joy.