

The D-Word

By Suzan Ormandy

McDonnell Nursery, Orinda

The D-word doesn't have to be a dirty word. There are many steps we can take in the short and long run to reduce the impact of this summer's and future drought conditions. With the winter of 2007 one of the driest on record, conserving water is not optional; water restrictions, however, are voluntary at present. A little conservation now means we may not face such emergency measures later.

EBMUD offers a wealth of very doable approaches to water conservation at www.ebmud.com: click on More Water Tips. The following 5 suggestions are gleaned primarily from that website and from discussion with Susan Handjian, one of the key contributors to EBMUD's exquisitely beautiful and informative book *Plants and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates of the San Francisco Bay Region* (\$34.95 retail).

1. Water less frequently but more deeply, which real gardeners have always known is best for encouraging strong, efficient roots. Specific irrigation depth/time ratios are on the EBMUD website, but three times a week for 15 minutes is the general rule, with a fourth watering added when temps exceed 95* (but still only 15 minutes).

2. Prevent wasteful run-off by setting your system's timer to repeat cycling: 3-5 minute run times with 20-30 minutes between to allow precious water to soak in rather than run off.

3. Water before sunrise.

4. Mulch beds with a minimum of 3" of material; any less doesn't really help, according to Ms. Handjian. Mulching also keeps clay soils from crusting over, modulates soil temperature and prevents weeds – so you can hardly go wrong with adding a healthy layer of mulch to your garden. Our nursery, for example, offers five varieties of attractive bark mulches; there are also other types of mulch too, like looser amendments and even pebbles.

5. For lawns, should you really feel the need for them, follow the irrigation guide-

lines mentioned above and raise your mower 1 1/2" - 2" higher than usual, i.e., the maximum height. Then the taller grass blades will shade the root bed, necessitating less water. And, gulp, refrain from fertilizing in summer. If you absolutely must, then use organic fertilizers like E.B. Stone's or Bradford Organics'. The slower, more natural growth these organics promote are more consistent with water conservation principles.

Also, certain high-use EBMUD residential customers are eligible for weather-based irrigation-controller rebates should they decide to install these systems along with certain hardscaping. Call 1-866-403-2683 or email custsvc@ebmud.com for details. EBMUD also offers free, on-site surveys of indoor and landscape water use to all single and multi-family customers in the District. Significant water savings often result. Call or email the numbers above.

As hinted at already, perhaps it's time to fall out of love with your lawn, especially if you don't have young kids at home anymore. Just take a look at the June issue of *Sunset Magazine*: the cover article on landscaping with gravel may sound unappealing, but you'll be pleasantly surprised at the aesthetics of this very environmental approach. Done right, gravel paths and terraces give a "hard-yet-soft" look, work well with all home styles, and of course greatly reduce water needs. This is true too of pavers, flagstones and decking. In fact, just leaf through this same *Sunset's* ads to appreciate how attractive, versatile and practical decking has become (pp. 2, 76, 101, 109). You just might reconsider that lawn – or at least some of it – after all.

Water-wise gardening includes choosing plants appropriate to this region. We live in a Mediterranean climate and should use plants native to summer-dry climates like southern Australia, South Africa, the Mediterranean countries and of course our own California. The same current issue of *Sunset* happens to have an excellent arti-

cle, "Water-wise gardens," that not only shows how pretty and dramatic xeriscape gardening can be but also how many other unexpected advantages it has, like attracting butterflies and birds as well as saving on fertilizer.

Visit www.xeriscape.org to see some stunning water-wise demo gardens. Mediterranean-climate natives like dramatic phormiums (New Zealand Flax), euphorbias and aeoniums, for example, as well as a host of colorful salvias, ceanothus and lavenders, all readily available at local nurseries. There are also special native nurseries, plant sales and demo gardens in our area, notably the renowned Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek. It is both a showcase of low-water landscaping as well as a rich educational resource on xeriscaping. If you visit their website, I guarantee you'll visit the Garden itself next week, even if it means playing hookey. And while it's not until November 10, the Bancroft and EBMUD will present *How to Remove a Lawn and Create a Water-Wise Garden*. Sooner, on July 14, there is a *Designing with Succulents* workshop. Call 925-210-9663 for information.

For container gardening, consider using a product like Soil Moist – polymer gel granules that reduce watering needs by up to 50% -- in your potting soil (before or after planting).

Finally, adding organic material (compost) to all plant beds is a wonderful way to promote healthy, less thirsty plants. Compost can be worked into the soil at any point; though before planting is easiest, you can always work it in or even just add a layer and let nature take its course. Compost and fertilizer with beneficial mycorrhizal fungi result in especially drought-resistant plant roots. And making your own compost is gratifying: Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Management offers workshops at local nurseries throughout the year and gives discounts on composters too. Call 925-096-1806 or go to www.wastediversion.org.

An even more efficient and complementary approach is using SoilSoup on beds, lawns and even in pots. This worm-casting compost tea-plus enriches, reinvigorates and makes soil much more moisture retentive. Available at our nursery for \$8.00/gallon, it's a real bargain, especially as that gallon can be greatly diluted in a hose-end sprayer or watering can.

Clearly, it's time we opened our minds to a different and more responsible approach to gardening and landscaping. But that doesn't mean dry and dull. As the Bancroft Garden's mission states, we can "find ... beauty and excitement possible in water-conserving landscaping" and practices.



Godetia



Penstemon



Salviagreggii



Kangaroo Paws (center)



Aeonium (center) Euphorbia martinii



Suzan Ormandy is explains how to water the Godetia

Garden Lights landscape & pool development inc.

Garden Lights is an Award Winning Landscape Design-Build Firm Offering Services in . . .

- Landscape Design & Installation
Planting - Masonry - Concrete - Carpentry
- Low-voltage Landscape Lighting
- Pool / Spa Design, Installation & Remodels
- Water Gardens, Ponds & Waterfalls

Design & Install with just one call.

925-254-4797

Free Consultations

Serving the Lamorinda Area for 17 years. Bonded - Licensed & Insured



Nurture your garden at

McDonnell Nursery

- Shrubs
- Garden Accessories
- Flowers
- Personalized Service

196 Moraga Way
Orinda

254-3713

- Open Daily -

www.mcdonnellnursery.com

