

Way to Grow in Orinda Save the Garden -- and Water!

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It seems ironic that five years of record-breaking rain followed by two years of less than 100 percent of normal rainfall could result in mandatory water rationing, but here we are again, using the “D” word, drought. As the urban sprawl of the Bay Area grows, so does the demand on our water resources. Hopefully, this drought will not last beyond this dry season, and the powers that be will start increasing our water capacity. But for now East Bay MUD is asking every homeowner to cut water use



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A sustainable garden in Lafayette that receives water only once every two weeks

by 19 percent.

What can you do to achieve this reduction without losing the investment you’ve made simple water- in your garden? Here are :saving steps

Stop watering every day. This saves (1 water and makes good horticultural sense. Watering every day causes plant roots to remain shallow. By watering more deeply and less frequently, your plant’s roots will extend deeper into the soil where the water .is stored longer

Evaluate, maintain and update your (1 irrigation system. Like most things in life, irrigation systems need routine maintenance. Sprinkler heads can get clogged or broken. Occasionally, heads need to be moved or

even capped off when plants grow or die. Checking your system to make sure the water is getting to where it is needed, might percent of your water use. 1· save you up to New drip heads can match the precipitation of spray heads, and may be added into an existing spray system for areas with fewer .plants

Zone your irrigation. Zoning is a (2 xeriscape principle (landscaping that doesn’t require supplemental irrigation) that can be implemented in most yards to meet the varied water requirements of a large array of plants. Most “zoning-type” 1· controllers, manufactured in the past years, will allow you to adjust both the watering time in each zone as well as the number of days per week each zone .receives water

To further explain the principle of zoning, we’ll use our own yard as an example. Our front terraced bank consists of plants that require watering only once a week or less. For that reason, this area is not on our automatic irrigation system. Instead it gets watered by hooking a hose up to a drip system which we can do once a week or less depending on weather demands. The rest of the front yard, including the lawn, is on our irrigation controller and gets watered every three days. The shaded planting beds closest to our house (where our thirstiest plants thrive) are set for the minimum amount of water needed on our irrigation system. These may require some additional hand-watering when temperatures rise but this arrangement allows us to avoid overwatering them most days while keeping these heavy drinkers happy with some extra hose-watering during a heat wave. Our back bank is planted with varieties that do just fine getting watered every four days while the back lawn and flower borders are on a more frequent watering schedule. Lastly, the vegetable garden starts out in the spring being watered every other day while the plants are getting established, then we reduce the days to every three days and when we start to harvest tomatoes we will reduce the watering further to every four

days. To fully utilize water-efficient zoning systems it helps if your garden was planned .and planted with that system in mind Improve, break up, and aerate your (1 soil. Getting the water to where it’s needed the most (the roots of your plants) is a big part of the water efficiency battle. Because our hard Orinda clay soils compact, water can easily run off rather than be absorbed. Breaking up your soil with a tiller, aerator or even a pick greatly enhances its ability to soak up water. You can also work some water-holding amendments into your soil to help it retain moisture. Proper lawn aeration helps immensely but be sure the plugs are raked off the lawn so they don’t break down .and refill the holes

Mulch your planting beds. Adding (1 inches of mulch will make a big 1 at least difference in retaining surface moisture. Mulch acts as a barrier between the sun and your soil, and it holds the moisture. Use a fine- to medium-size mulch, and avoid those with large pieces or stringy shredded textures. Our favorite mulch to date is a dyed variety from West Coast Chip Harvester located in Martinez. This economical mulch is made from uniformly chipped hardwood cuttings from local trees. Make sure mulch is not piled too high against the base of your plants but that it is .higher around any exposed root areas Add water absorbing polymers to pots (1 and hanging baskets. These polymers can hold five times their weight in water. When used properly, they will extend container watering to every two to three days. We are currently experimenting with the use of polymers in regular garden planting beds and have plans to use them on a new lawn installation to determine the effectiveness of their water retention abilities for sod .as well

Invest in Root or Grow More Root (1 Feeder(s). Evaporation can occur almost instantly when using conventional watering methods especially in hot, dry areas. Root feeders are simply a long spike that attaches to your garden hose and is pushed into the soil getting water to the roots where it’s most needed. Fertilizers can also be added to a chamber at the top of this devise for feeding trees and shrubs. This root feeder will be especially effective for thirsty trees .like Japanese Maples and Dogwoods Inoculate your soils with beneficial (1 mycorrhizal fungi. This fungus grows naturally in soil around plant roots, creating a microscopic web that helps absorb water. We’ve been testing these products and have

seen some pretty amazing results. There are several ways to apply mycorrhizal fungi. We've used root feeders to inject it into the soil, we've rototilled it into new planting beds, and filled chimney holes at the base of trees and shrubs (especially those showing signs of stress

Reduce or replace thirsty annuals with ones that require less water. Impatiens are actually drought-tolerant when planted properly in shady conditions, but need tons of water when planted in full sun. For all the color and less water try planting Wave Petunias, Profusion Zinnias, Ivy Geraniums, dwarf Dahlias, Spider Flower, or a new annual that we're particularly fond of called Bee Balm

One of the newest trends in irrigation and one that EBMUD supports is the use of ET controllers. EBMUD is even giving rebates for some ET installations. The ET controller automatically adjusts the amount of water applied to your landscape, based on weather conditions. The "smart" ET controller receives radio, pager or Internet signals with evapo-transpiration information, to replace only the moisture your landscape has lost to heat, plant use, and wind. Keep in mind that ET controllers alone are no guarantee of water savings. If you want to take more drastic measures, here are four more ideas

Replace your lawns with drought-tolerant sustainable trees and shrubs. EBMUD recommends that residential percent of landscapes use no more than their property for lawn. One of the worst water wasters that we see is Lamorinda percent lawns on slopes of more than Install a new and efficient sprinkler system following all xeriscape principles. We recommend using Hunter or Rainbird systems

Replace your lawn with artificial sod. We would not have suggested this just three years ago, but today's artificial grass is not your mother's bright green Astroturf. These days it looks much closer to the real thing. We've recently installed several large artificial lawns to rave reviews from the homeowner. A bonus for dog owners with artificial turf is there are no more brown spots and no watering makes the poops much easier to scoop

Install a rain and drainage water-storage system. Cisterns have been around for thousands of years, but until recently they have been too expensive and space-

consuming to use in California. Advances in water collection and storage systems can allow for thousands of gallons of water to be stored underground for use in sprinkler systems, water features, and swimming pools

We hope these suggestions can help you achieve your water-saving goals while enjoying a lush and thriving garden. In the long term, we may all need to adjust our thinking about what makes a landscape beautiful. Xeriscapes and sustainable landscapes are the wave of the future. Many of our local nurseries have only small selections of plants that are drought tolerant, native, or considered sustainable. That is bound to change soon

For questions or more information about water conservation in your landscape, contact us at gardenlights@comcast.net