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Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia Brian Singing in the Rain!



An elegant enclosed patio providing shade, waterway, and drought resistant plantings including birds of paradise. Photos Cynthia Brian

With the imminent drought high on the radar, garden writers from around the Bay Area were invited for a private tour of the Ruth Bancroft Garden (<http://www.ruthbancroftgarden.org/>) in Walnut Creek to be reacquainted with the beauty of drought tolerant plantings. As Mother Nature would have it, on the day of this special excursion, the skies exploded and the rain came tumbling down. Only six writers, including myself, braved the wind, cold, and drenching downpour.

Clad in my hot pink fluorescent rain coat and boots, I slipped, sloshed, and slid amidst the mud and the puddles admiring the vision and design of the vibrant 106-year-old Ruth. Echeverias, yuccas, agaves, aloes, cacti, gasterias, sedums, pines, palms, and eucalyptus glistened in their watery beds adding vibrant strokes of color, texture, and pattern to an otherwise dreary day.

As I danced in the much welcomed rain, the thought of returning to the days of water rationing when the mantra was "if it's yellow let it mellow and if it's brown flush it down" haunted me. With the winter hibernation over, our gardens awake from their winter slumber. For a gardener, this time of year normally proclaims the perpetual party of planning, preparing, and planting. But with irrigation availability as a major concern, we need to look at ways that we can save our landscape while conserving water.

Seventy percent of our planet Earth is covered in water, although less than 4 percent is fresh and only 1 percent is potable. Water is a precious commodity and a drought is a gardener's worst nightmare. But exactly what defines a drought? According to the United States Geological Survey, a drought is defined as "a period of drier-than-normal conditions that results in water-related problems, ... the flow of streams and rivers declines, water levels in lakes and reservoirs fall, and the depth to water in wells increases. If dry weather persists and water-supply problems develop, the dry period can become a drought."

We could decide to turn off the spigot but allowing our gardens to go dry will have negative ramifications including loss of property values, increased heat around our homes, physical and psychological health benefit reductions, loss of recreational activities, decreased air quality, and a larger carbon footprint as we stop growing edibles in our backyards. Since we can't change the weather, we need to change how we respond to it. In my two-part series, I offer my suggestions to help your garden survive the impending dry season without a water bill that breaks the bank.

Part 1-Drought Gardening Series
Preparing for the Drought:

CHECK FOR LEAKS

Make sure that your outside pipes are insulated against freezing. When water freezes it expands and pipes often burst. Even a tiny 1/8 crack could spew 250 gallons of water per day. If you witness wet spots, water running along driveways, or puddles, investigate for a leak. Check hose bibs for drips, replace washers, and routinely inspect automatic sprinklers and connections.

AMEND THE SOIL

The foundation of every garden is the soil. The ideal soil drains quickly while storing water. For drought toleration, add several inches of rich, organic compost to encourage deep root formation while trapping moisture. Make your own compost by adding kitchen scraps, egg shells, coffee grinds, tea leaves, shredded newspaper, leaves, lawn clippings, fish bones, aged manure, non-diseased weeds, and other organic matter to a bin or pile. 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.

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 6 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 over spray. 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:

1. Newly planted trees, shrubs, and perennials.
2. Newly seeded or repaired lawns.
3. Plants exposed on windy sites or in sandy soils.
4. Vegetables that are flowering.

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.

WEED

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

STOP FERTILIZING

If you plan to fertilize this season do it now while the weather is still cooler 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.

These tips will get you started. Next month, I'll provide additional information on surviving and thriving during a drought. And if Mother Nature decides to extend the party, perhaps we'll still be singing in the rain.

To receive a complimentary list of drought resistant plants by email, contact
Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com.
Cynthia Brian's Mid-Month Reminders

- DEFINE property boundaries and create curb appeal with flowering shrubs. Numerous new varieties of hydrangea are a good choice, including compact sizes like Strawberry Sundae.
- POUR chamomile tea around the base of newly planted seedlings to eliminate fungus growth.
- DISPLAY fallen camellias on a hedge, ledge, or pathway for outside interest that are not pretty enough to float in a vase, but not rotten enough to toss in the compost bin. As the camellias wilt, dispose of them.
- EXPLORE the San Francisco Home and Garden Show March 19-23 and experience the exhibits, edibles, flowers, market, and kids' gardens (www.sfgardenshow.com).
- FERTILIZE hungry lawns to strengthen roots, resist cold, heat, and high traffic when weather is wet. This feeding will help combat stress of drought.
- PRUNE fig trees and grapevines. Dry the branches and cuttings to use in your smoker or barbecue this summer to add interesting flavors to your grilled specialties.
- VISIT The Secret Garden at Macy's Union Square Sunday, March 23-April 6 for a floral wonderland with flowering fashion shows and children's activities.

Think green. Happy St. Patrick's Day! Happy Gardening, Happy Growing.

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Cynthia is available as a speaker and consultant.



Snake plants add height, visual interest, and texture with little water requirements.



Succulents are attractive. A ruffled echeveria gibbiflora resembles a fleshy red lettuce.



A low maintenance beauty that requires little water is sedum shown here in bloom.



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