

Growing Vines, and More, In Time of Drought

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But there are ways to preserve water in the soil, said Susan Captain. First she recommends staying away from synthetic fertilizers because the nitrate and sodium it adds into the soil kills all the living organisms, including earthworms that enrich and aerate the soil naturally. "Once you've killed everything in your soil, you become completely dependent on fertilizers," she added. The Captains stopped rototilling to protect the healthy soil organisms, and they take care of the soil by shredding everything, such as pruned branches and leaves, and leaving it as topsoil. "It disintegrates and feeds the soil, and keeps the water from evaporating," she said. "It's a win-win. Why would you do anything else?"

She notes that dry farming on a slope, as they do, is less common, but that the clay content of their soil, with the addition of the compost, retains water nicely. "The healthier your soil, the better water retention you'll get," she concluded.

Janet Caprile, farm advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension in Contra Costa and Alameda counties, who spoke at the training session, recommends crops that yield more for less water. "We want more crop per drop," she said, recommending hybrid tomatoes rather than heirloom, and favoring the winter gardens that will produce a lot with much less water.

Crops that can be successfully dry farmed include tomatoes, grapes, potatoes, winter squash, grains and fruit trees, according to the UCCE Master Gardener Program website (ccmg.ucanr.edu). "When we have winter rains, some of the water is stored in the soil for plants to use in the spring as the weather warms up and growth begins. Gardeners use this 'bank' of available water to dry farm – a technique that depends on sufficient soil moisture and deep-rooted plants that scavenge to access water without adding much supplemental irrigation," the website states.

The UCCE Master Gardener Program suggests adding organic matter to the soil, using three to four inches of mulch on top of the soil, using a drip system, planting early-maturing or short-season varieties of vegetables, and laying out planting



Shredded branches are used for topsoil

Photo Sophie Braccini

areas in blocks, not rows. "As plants mature their foliage touches and creates an umbrella over the soil, shading roots, reducing evaporation and creating a beneficial CO2 bubble on the underside of plants," it states.

The organization also recommends sowing seeds in flats rather than directly into the garden bed, which will use less water.

"Planting a vegetable garden instead of a lawn still makes sense for homeowners," Caprile said. "It will use less water and it will feed you."

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