

Digging Deep - Gardening with Cynthia Brian

Water Wise Dreams

By Cynthia Brian

"If something you are doing is not working, doing more of it won't work any better." – Unknown



Agave and succulents thrive in dry conditions.

Photos Cynthia Brian

Spring, summer and fall have always been my most favorite seasons because I thrive in the sunshine, relish the warmth and indulge my senses in the lavish, lush beauty of the landscapes of California. This year has been an exception to my predilection as my garden is straining to survive in this thirsty environment. As I was writing this column, the skies sprinkled droplets of rain and I was so excited I stood outside with my face to the darkened heavens blissfully grateful for this tiny bit of moisture. Water, our most valuable resource, is becoming increasingly precious as our climate changes. The way we have been functioning in our gardens isn't working any longer.

I was privileged to be a speaker at the recent National Gardening Symposium held in the horticultural wonderland of Pasadena where the temperatures ex-

ceeded 100 degrees on a daily basis. It was hot, hotter, and hottest as the thermometer hit 107. Although considered a Mediterranean climate, it felt more Saharan. Attendees hailed from all around the United States, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, as well as a few other countries with the most discussed topic being H₂O. Trees were at the top of the list of plantings that must be saved. The world is watching California as we struggle to find a path to water conservation.

On a behind-the-scenes tour of the Los Angeles County Arboretum, I learned about an age-old technique used in Eastern Europe called "hugelkultur." Translated from German, it means "mound culture," because the practice involves salvaging limbs, branches, and debris to make raised beds that will improve drain-

ing and grow gardens without irrigation or fertilization. The Arboretum team removed a large lawn from an area where they are now experimenting with various ways to save and harvest water by slowing it down, spreading it out, and filtering it. Hugelkultur is something that many of us could embrace, especially with our compacted clay soil. For large properties with slopes or trees that have fallen or need to be cut down, hugelkultur could be a godsend. The process to design a hugel is simple.

1. Choose an area where you want a mound.
2. Gather logs, branches, twigs, other wood debris and leaves to line the area. Don't use wood from Black locust, walnut or cedar because of toxicity. Rotted wood is great.
3. First lay the big logs, add a layer of branches, then twigs, then leaves and grass clippings. Make the mound a minimum of three feet; seven feet or more is best. The mound will compact and shrink.
4. Water the layers.
5. Add kitchen scraps, compost, and mulch. Wood is high in carbon and could leach nitrogen from the soil. Compost is a necessary ingredient.
6. Add two inches of topsoil and more mulch.
7. Prepare your beds now in the fall so they will cure for a spring planting.

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Growbags are the latest development in moisture retention for container plantings.