

Plant Right, Water Wisely

Saving water doesn't have to involve the cost and inconvenience of tearing up your yard to install a new irrigation system. It's easy to save water and reduce your utility bills with simple changes to your landscaping and gardening routine:

- **Landscape to suit your lot.** Choose grass or plants that have low water requirements and will thrive in your local climate. Consider your lot's exact features, including sun and shade, dry and damp areas, plant size, and how you plan to use each section of your yard.
- **Keep soil healthy.** Aerating your lawn and around trees at least once a year helps improve water penetration. When planting, turn and cultivate the soil and add compost or fertilizer to improve moisture retention and grow healthier plants that need less water to stay strong.
- **Mulch well around plants, bushes and trees.** Using 2 to 4 inches of mulch reduces evaporation, moderates spikes and lows in soil temperatures, improves water penetration and helps control weeds that compete for water.
- **"Hydro-zone" your yard.** Grouping plants with similar moisture needs in the same area makes it easier to make sure they get the water they need without overwatering. Separate plants from grassy areas, which have different water requirements.
- **Plant in spring or fall.** Avoid summer, when hotter temperatures mean plants need more water to become established.
- **Save grass for functional areas.** Plant grass in play zones and other areas where it will be used and enjoyed. Instead of planting turf on steep slopes or other hard-to-water spaces, consider ground cover, perimeter plants or mulch.
- **Plant shade trees.** The shade they cast creates natural "air-conditioning," lowering air and soil temperatures and reducing soil moisture loss.
- **Maintain your yard regularly.** A well-maintained yard requires less water, so weed, prune and mow as needed.

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- **Get in the zone.** Schedule each individual zone in your irrigation system to account for type of sprinkler, sun or shade exposure, and soil in that section. Different zones will almost always need different watering schedules.
- **Consider soil type.** Type of soil determines how quickly water can be absorbed without runoff. Watering more than soil can absorb causes runoff and waste.

- **Don't send water down the drain.** Set sprinklers to water plants, not your driveway, sidewalk, patio or buildings.
- **Water only when needed.** Saturate root zones and let the soil dry. Watering too much and too frequently results in shallow roots, weed growth, disease and fungus.
- **Water at the best time.** Watering during the heat of the day may cause losses of up to 30 percent due to evaporation. Prevent water loss by watering when the sun is low or down, winds are calm and temperatures are cool — typically between the evening and early morning.
- **Water more often for shorter periods.** For example, setting your system to run for three, 5-minute intervals lets soil absorb more water than watering for 15 minutes at one time, reducing runoff.
- **Adapt watering to the season.** Familiarize yourself with the settings on your irrigation controller and adjust the watering schedule regularly based on seasonal weather conditions. Or invest in a smart controller so your system can make these changes automatically.

Smart Irrigation Month is an initiative of the Irrigation Association, a non-profit industry organization dedicated to promoting efficient irrigation. Learn more at www.smartirrigationmonth.org. Additional water conservation information can be found at the Tuolumne Utility District website at <http://www.tudwater.com/water-conservation/> and the Central Sierra Cooperative Extension website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/Drought_Resources/.

This article was submitted by the University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners of Tuolumne County.