

7 tips for landscape survival during drought

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With water reserves at all-time lows, water rates reaching all-time highs, and severe water rationing on the horizon, representatives from the staff at the UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden compiled some quick tips for homeowners whose goal is to save water as well as their landscapes.

1. **Mulch.** “If I could only give one recommendation it would be mulch, mulch, mulch!” cites Cary Avery, associate director of grounds and landscape services. “Mulching not only keeps the ground moist, but as the mulch breaks down, it provides good nutrients for your plants, improves your soil quality, and looks attractive in areas where there’s little landscaping or your plants have not filled in.”

2. **Compost.** “The sponge-like nature of compost means that rain or irrigation water will be absorbed and stay in your soil—where your plants need it—instead of trickling off into the gutter. It’s also good for getting many types of plants established during their first year in the ground,” says Stacey Parker, GATEways horticulturist. “Add compost before you mulch to double the impact of your water investment.”

3. **Focus on your trees.** “In times like these you expect that your lawn will suffer, but don’t forget about your trees if you decide to turn off your irrigation altogether,” explains Ryan Deering, GATEways horticulturist. “Give your trees a deep watering with a hose about every two weeks. If you lose your lawn, it’s not the end of the world. In fact, it may be a good thing. But if you lose a tree, you’ve lost years of a shade canopy, and a nice wildlife habitat, not to mention its value in terms of home energy conservation.”

4. **Tune up your irrigation.** “With the recent freezing weather you’ll want to look at your irrigation system closely to make sure you aren’t losing water due to any broken pipes. Turn on your system and make sure water is going on the plants or turf you want to irrigate. An efficient well-tuned irrigation system will use less water if properly managed and maintained,” recommends Matt Forrest, irrigation supervisor. “Once that has been evaluated, talk to someone at your local hardware store about replacing old sprinkler heads with low-water-use heads for turf, and consider converting shrub and ground cover irrigation to drip or micro-spray. These small changes will help make sure you are watering your plants, not sidewalks or driveways.”

5. **Reduce your watering schedule.** “If you haven’t already, do it. It’s the simplest way to conserve,” says Andrew Fulks, director of the UC Davis Putah Creek, Riparian Reserve and campus naturalized landscapes. “If you are irrigating for 15 minutes, turn it down to 6. If you are watering four days a week, change it to two, and make sure you are watering in the early morning or late at night. Give the water a chance to seep into the soil before the sun comes out and you lose it to evaporation.”

What if you’ve already done these things? What’s next for the advanced water-saving homeowner?

6. **Replace your plants with California natives.** “Many homeowners are interested in this type of landscape, but worry that the plants might be hard to grow. However, with right mix, you’ll have an easy-care garden with year-round color and interest, long-term water-savings once the plants are established, and a much-needed habitat for our pollinator friends,” explains Ellen Zagory, horticulturist. “In addition, people also worry they’ll have trouble finding the plants at their local retailer. Come to the Friends of the UC Davis Arboretum plants sales this season. We’ve got a great selection of native plants for this purpose, and we’ll point you in the right direction.”

7. **Remove your lawn.** “It’s not that scary, I promise. There are so many great alternatives to a standard lawn,” encourages Taylor Lewis, nursery manager at the Arboretum Teaching Nursery. “You’ll see more and more information about how to do this online, or I also encourage you to find a local seminar sponsored by Master Gardeners or a similar club. We’ve compiled a list of these types of workshops on our website.”