SURVIVE THE DRY

Preserve our most precious resource by creating your very own waterwise garden

Words: Kirsten Sach

1

waterwise gardens

2

It falls from the sky as rain, snow, sleet or hail, shaping and sculpting the earth and providing sustenance for plants and animals alike. It is the fundamental link between all forms of life. Ancient civilisations treated it with the utmost respect and reverence, often regarding this special fluid as the water of life.

Water provides protection, subsistence, industrial energy, processing of materials and much of our recreation. From a scientific point of view, it's the most important chemical compound known and is the only one that can exist as a solid, gas and liquid. It is one of our most precious resources and yet our relationship with water remains a critical one.

Although we don't think of New Zealand as a dry country, water shortages are never far away. When the weather is hot and dry, the levels of water in our lakes, rivers and reservoirs go down — and our water usage goes up.

Gardens are one of the thirstiest areas of water wastage under these conditions — a garden hose can use up to 20 litres every minute. When a region is in the grip of a drought, local and regional councils often impose water restrictions.

The good news is that we can design and make changes within our gardens to minimise these effects, often with great benefits, such as plant and soil health, cost-effectiveness and low-maintenance gardens.

There are six key principles when designing a waterwise garden.

1 Group your plants

By choosing plants with similar water needs and grouping them together in one area, it enables you to irrigate more effectively without wasting water on adjacent plants that don't require as much.

Plants cannot be chosen on water needs alone. Other factors such as sun/wind exposure or frost tenderness also come into play. Most importantly, choose plants that are most suited to your climate, environment and soil.

2 Limit your lawn

Keeping a lawn looking good over drier months results in higher water usage. When designing your garden, reduce your lawn area to what you would actually use and think about the shape in terms of how it can be irrigated most effectively.

Often, the area in front of your home is not used and could be turned into a gravel or planted garden, or an area of porous paving. Lawn doesn't grow as well in shade, so creating additional planting or decking can be an attractive and more functional solution.

Choose a lawn species that survives on less water, remembering that the coarser, more durable grasses are more drought-tolerant.

3 Efficient watering

Watering your garden can generate ample amounts of wastage, so considerable time and thought need to go into how to irrigate your garden effectively.

Sprinklers placed incorrectly can end up watering your paths and it's quite possible to waste 1000 litres an hour if you're not careful. They have their uses for lawn areas, but with

1. *Your garden need not be bland with echinacea, a medicinal perennial that provides stunning summer flowers. Photo by Kirsten Sach Landscape Design.*

2. *A vegie patch can still be part of a waterwise garden. Just remember to mulch thickly so it retains moisture. Photo by Kirsten Sach Landscape Design.*


4

TOP TIPS FOR A WATERWISE GARDEN

- Dig lots of compost into your soil to increase the water-holding capacity.
- Mulch thickly to 100mm to keep the soil moist for longer.
- Group plants according to their water requirements.
- Choose plants that are most suited to your environment, climate and soil.
- Use a timer on any irrigation.
- Water in the evening or early morning.
- Less frequent deep soakings are better than lots of light watering.
- Get a water tank.
- Reduce your lawn area and use a drought-tolerant species.
- Use drought-tolerant plants.
- Plant natives densely.

spray drift and evaporation they can prove expensive and wasteful.

Drippers are almost always the best way to water shrubs, plants and vegetables, as they deliver water directly to the roots.

Only water the garden when it's absolutely essential. Fewer but longer watering sessions are much more effective than lots of small ones and encourage root systems to penetrate deeper into the soil. Watering in the evening will also minimise evaporation.

Timers are good as they allow you to irrigate for a certain length of time without causing wastage as a result of forgetting to switch off the watering system.

Harvesting rain and recycling grey water are also relevant in the waterwise garden. Collecting water off your roof into a water tank gives you a supply of water for the garden in dry periods. Grey water can be directed and used in the garden as long as eco products are used, such as biodegradable soaps and detergents. Always check with your local council as to any regulations regarding water harvesting and recycling.


5

4 Mulching

Mulching your garden is one of the most important principles in water saving. Apart from suppressing weeds and increasing soil and plant health, the main benefit is to reduce the amount of moisture loss from the soil through evaporation. Always mulch to a thickness of 75–100mm. Anything less proves ineffective over a prolonged period.

There's a multitude of different products to use as mulch, including garden compost, shredded bark, wood chips and pea straw. Gravel, pebbles and stones are also used as mulch and suit particular plants and garden styles.

Always top up mulch in spring once the soil starts warming up and most mulch, such as bark and compost, will need to be done on a yearly basis.


6

Dig as much compost as possible into garden beds before mulching as this will help hold more moisture in the soil.

5 Maintenance

Keep your garden weed-free, as weeds will steal any available moisture and nutrients at your plants' expense. By mulching properly, this will be minimised, anyway.

The lawn is probably the most common maintenance task and the most water-demanding in dry months. Don't cut the grass too short over this time — this encourages longer root systems and means more access to water in the soil.

Vegetable gardens are big water feeders, so mulch with pea straw or good-quality hay and add large amounts of compost in spring.

6 Drought-tolerant plants

Choose plants that can tolerate dry conditions when setting the theme for your garden. The options range from succulent gardens with rocks and gravel to New Zealand native plants that when grouped densely require very little watering.

A more traditional look can be achieved using a broad range of annuals, perennials and shrubs. Combining natives and exotics with similar water requirements can often result in a very successful and eclectic garden.

No matter what the circumstances, preserving water should be high on every garden owner's list. Following these six key design principles will ensure your garden becomes a waterwise one. ■


7

4. *Aloe arborescens will inject some bright winter colour and strong architectural form into your waterwise garden. Photo by Kirsten Sach Landscape Design.*

5. *Kangaroo paw is planted with native libertia and muehlenbeckia in this drought-tolerant gravel garden. Photo by Kirsten Sach Landscape Design.*

6. *Carex testacea and coprosma drifts of groundcovers are perfect for low-maintenance coastal gardens. Photo by Kirsten Sach Landscape Design.*

7. *Muehlenbeckia astonii is a drought-tolerant New Zealand native that can be clipped into balls for a more formal look. Photo by Kirsten Sach Landscape Design.*