

## February 2022 Gardener's Corner

By Cate White, SJ county UCCE Master Gardener

# Renewing your Yard to Create a Water Wise Landscape

February and March are ideal months for re-landscaping your yard. With the prospect of continuing drought, now is the time to think about converting to a water-wise garden. You might want to keep some specific areas reserved for favorite plants that are heavier water users (such as roses), but the bulk of your landscape should be planted with plants that have low water requirements.

To begin your renovation, remove all dead and dying plants, including any lawn areas. If you plan to remove a large area of lawn, you will need to use a sod cutter. Once everything you want to clear away is gone, survey what remains. Are there trees that need attention? What is the condition of the soil? Is it hard and compacted? If so, it will need to be broken up and amended with some organic material such as compost.

Next, assess the watering system. Do you have an automated system? If so, are there any broken or leaking lines that need repair? Are the sprinkler heads working? If you don't have an automated system, consider installing one. Using a drip system is a good way to conserve water. Existing sprinkler heads can be converted to drip lines. To learn more about installing a drip system, refer to the UCANR website listed below.

Evaluate whether you want to keep the original walkways or reconfigure them. If existing ones are badly cracked and uneven, they will need replacing. Steppingstones can be an alternative to pouring new cement, and you might try using the broken-up pieces of cement removed from your existing walkways as steppingstones. If laying new pathways, remember that curving lines are more pleasing than straight ones.

Finally, observe to see how much sunlight the yard gets. Is there full sun all day long on the entire yard? Are some areas shaded? What time of day and how much?

Now that you can see the bare bones of the yard, think about what sort of plants you want. To be pleasing to the eye, choose plants that vary in height and coloration. A small tree, combined with various grasses and flowering plants all can add interest. Place low growing plants near driveways and walkways. Put plants with similar water and other cultural requirements together. Check out the San Joaquin Master Gardener web site under Water Conservation in the Home Landscape. Here you will find a wealth of information about low maintenance, water-wise yards. Click on Low Water Landscapes to find plant lists, such as the Arboretum All Stars, WUCOLS, and Sunset Plant Guides. When planting, remember to provide for the growth of your new plants, leaving them plenty of space so they won't be crowded. Mulch with several inches of bark, to conserve moisture, leaving some bare earth around the base of each plant. Here are a few plant choices in various categories to get you started.



*Aloe Vera, a waterwise succulent*

- Small Trees; *Arbutus unedo* (Strawberry Tree), *Laurus Noblis* (Sweet Bay), Fruitless Olive var. "Swan Hill", *Lagerstroemia indica* (Crepe Myrtle).
- Larger Shrubs; Upright Rosemary, *Ceanothus* (California Lilac), *Cistus* (Rock Rose), *Salvias*, such as "Mexican Sage" and "Russian sage", Manzanitas, Nandina, both standard and dwarf varieties.
- Smaller shrubs; *Callistemon* var. "Little John", Dwarf Lavenders, *Teucrium chamaedrys* (Germander), *Artemisia*, *Nepeta x faassenii* (Catmint).
- Grasses: *Pennisetum* (Fountain Grass), Muhly Grass, *Poa costiniana* (Australian blue grass), *Muhlenbergiarigens* (Deergrass).
- Ground covers: Creeping Thymes and Oreganos, *Teucrium majoricam*, *Dymondia*, Prostrate Rosemary, Cotoneaster, Ceanothus or Manzanita.



Callistemon "Little John", water-wise small shrub with winter flowers



Spanish Lavender, a smaller spring-blooming lavender

**Resources:** New Sunset Western Garden Book, Plant Finder, pgs. 43-120  
 Web site: <http://sjmastergardeners.ucanr.edu>, Irrigation in the Landscape, Drip Irrigation in the Home Landscape, Water Conservation in the Home Landscape, Low Water Landscapes, WUCOLS, Arboretum All Stars

## February Garden Checklist

- Plant bare root shrubs and trees, like roses and fruit trees
- Continue baiting for ants, snails, slugs and earwigs
- Monitor for Asian citrus psyllid
- Prune deciduous trees and shrubs such as fruit trees, crepe myrtle and roses. Remove dead, diseased wood, making cuts properly to encourage good structure. Spray with horticultural oil to control insects and diseases. Spray peaches to prevent peach leaf curl one more time before bud break.
- Cut back deciduous sages such as Mexican sage to within 6-8 inches from the ground. Cut back fountain grasses to within 18 inches to 2 feet off the ground.
- Plant seedlings of broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and lettuce and parsley. Plant beets, chard, carrots and peas from seed. Spring flowers such as violas, pansies, snapdragons and Iceland poppies can also be planted now.
- Continue adjusting irrigation according to the weather. Do not water within 48 hours of measurable rain.