June 2022 Gardener's Corner
Waterwise Gardening

By Cate White, San Joaquin County Master Gardener

The entire western United States continues to face severe drought conditions. Reservoirs are running low, and groundwater pumping is becoming more regulated as underground aquifers are depleted. Water has always been a precious resource in California, and this year conservation is even more urgent.

So, what does this mean for those of us who love to garden? Practicing water conscious gardening means you should avoid planting thirsty plants such as Hydrangeas or Redwood trees. However, it doesn't necessarily mean we are limited to growing succulents and cactus; there are many attractive plants that have low to moderate water requirements. The University of California Cooperative Extension provides two good resources for finding appropriate plants to grow in our area. WUCOLS (Water Use Classification of Landscape Species) offers a website that allows you to research plants name or by type (such as groundcover), giving water use needs for each. The Arboretum All Stars web site is a listing of plants along with their water needs that thrive in our area. Both usually have pictures and cultural information that can help you decide if a particular plant fills your needs. The plants pictured in this column come from the All Stars site. Another good resource is the Sunset Western Garden Book. Many fine options can be found using these resources.

Hunnemania fumarolia
Mexican Tulip Poppy
UC Arboretum All Stars

Zephyranthes candida
Argentine Rain Lily
UC Arboretum All Stars

You may need to ration water, giving priority to those plants that are hardest to replace, such as trees and shrubs. Mature trees should be able to get by with minimal watering, although younger trees will require more. Shrubs, fruit and nut trees will have slightly higher requirements. The lowest priority should be annual flowers, herbs, and/or vegetables. Turf less than a year old will have greater need for water than more established turf. This year, I decided to grow fewer vegetables, letting one of my planting beds go fallow for the summer.

The following are additional tips for managing water in your yard.

- Be familiar with your irrigation system. Know how to set up your watering program and review it regularly. Check often for broken lines, misdirected sprinkler heads and faulty valves.
- Drip irrigation and soaker hoses are the most efficient for annual, vegetable, and perennial beds as well as trees. Be sure to water trees and shrubs at the "drip line", not on their trunks, which can cause rot.
- Rotor sprinkler heads are best for lawns. To be sure that your lawn is watered evenly, try the "tuna can test". Place tuna cans in strategic locations around your lawn, then run the sprinklers. After the sprinkling cycle, check the cans to see how much water is in each one. If the amount in each can varies greatly, adjust your sprinkler heads to get more even water distribution.
- Try to place plants with similar watering requirements in the same watering zone. If this is not possible, add more drip lines to thirstier plants, or use drippers with a higher water flow rating.

Rotor Sprinkler recommended for lawns

- Manteca generally has sandy loam soil, which dries out more quickly than the clay soils found in most areas of California. Use a screwdriver to measure the moisture in your soil. It should be damp to a depth of 2 inches.
- Early morning watering is most efficient
- Adding compost is important to retaining soil moisture, especially in our sandy soils. Mulching with bark or compost to a depth of 2 to 4 inches also helps but keep bark away from trunks of trees and shrubs to avoid rot. Compost makes good mulch for vegetable and flowerbeds.
- Withhold fertilizer, especially fertilizer high in nitrogen, as that stimulates growth, in turn increasing the need for water.
- Plants in pots and raised beds will need more water than those in the ground
- Keep beds free from water hungry weeds. Household water can be saved in buckets or jugs and used to water plants with high water needs, such as those in pots.   I keep a bucket in my shower to collect the water I run until it is hot enough for showering. The same thing can be done with containers by the kitchen sink.

Follow city of Manteca Water Conservation Guidelines.

- Residences with odd numbered addresses can water Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, while even numbered addresses may water Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. No watering is allowed Mondays, or within 48 hours of measurable rainfall. Watering early in the morning avoids excess evaporation and wind drift. The city recommends watering before 4 am or after 7 am, when water pressure is highest.
- Watering must be done before noon or after 6 pm.
- Avoid run-off. If run-off occurs, adjust your watering program. You might try a two-phase system, programing your irrigation to run for half the total time once through, then a second time after an hour or more for the other half.
- Water should never be used to hose off sidewalks, driveways, or patios.

For more information about best irrigation practices, go to: sjmastergardeners.ucanr.edu, and click on Water Conservation in the Home Landscape. Let's hope for some good rain this coming winter!

June Garden Checklist

- Mow lawn down by no more than 1/3 when weather is hot

- Monitor watering system closely, checking valves, hoses and sprinklers

- Deep-water trees once or twice during the summer if there is a prolonged hot spell.

- Prune vigorous vines such as wisteria to keep them in check

- Continue to monitor plants for disease and insect damage. Discourage insects with a sharp spray of water, neem oil, or insecticidal soap. Use neem oil on powdery mildew. Use Bt on caterpillars. Spraying should be done when bees are not present, preferably early in the morning before the heat of the day, or in the evening after sunset.

- Put out bait if ants are invading plants

  (Note: This column is a revise of one written last summer. However, I think the information is so important that it should be revisited each year---Cate.)