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Sustainable Landscaping for California's Mediterranean Climate

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Let's face it, most of us are not into the botany and horticulture of plants, but we want our landscapes and gardens to look nice for curb appeal and to accommodate our families for play and relaxation. Sometimes in our endeavor to accomplish this feat we assume that money, human energy, and abundant use of water, fertilizer, and chemicals can make up for our inappropriate (or rushed) planning. A more sensible approach is to pay closer attention to local surroundings and design landscapes to compliment our environment rather than antagonize it. The result is more gardening success with less work and inputs. This holistic approach to gardening is known as Mediterranean style gardening or sustainable landscaping.

Plants and climate zones: California's Central Valley and eastern foothills have hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters. There are 5 regions in the world with a "Mediterranean" climate: the southwestern tip of Africa, parts of west Australia, Chile's central coast, and of course, the Mediterranean basin, which encompasses several countries.

Many plants native to those areas perform well in California. The reverse is also true. Many California native plants thrive in other Mediterranean climate areas. Sunset's Western Garden Book indicates plant origins and areas of adaptation. For our California inland landscapes the final selection of "environment appropriate" plants from the Mediterranean regions of the world is deciding if they tolerate our summer and winter extremes or if they are better adapted to mild coastal areas.

Sustainable landscaping doesn't mean ugly or unkempt: Traditional gardens in Mediterranean-climate areas (California sustainable landscapes) use time honored techniques to reduce water use and create a cool and pleasant retreat. We have often used these same techniques in our own gardens, but if we slightly adjust our mindset, we can be more water and energy efficient, and keep beauty as a top priority. Instead of wall to wall lawns or lush New England style greenery, consider where to place:

Hardscape, such as patios, seating walls, terraces, and paved paths to encourage outdoor living and reduce the irrigated garden area.

Shade structures, such as arbors, pergolas, and gazebos, to provide comfort in summer heat and reduce heat absorption by hard surfaces.

Container gardens to create an oasis of lush plants while controlling water use.

Water features, such as fountains and pools, to lower ambient temperature, increase the sense of comfort, and provide a relaxing sound, while using less water than a heavily irrigated garden.

A combination of elements: The front yard often has the best sun exposure, so why not add a patio to enjoy the winter months? Carve out an area that is big enough for a few pieces of outdoor furniture, install hardscape, add a privacy screen of bushes, and muffle the street sounds with a small water feature. Voila! A fun place to sip coffee and so much less lawn to water and mow!

Design adds to drama: Planted areas don't have to be big to have a dramatic effect. Start with the shape of the lawn and flower beds. Most of us have square or rectangular back yards with a square concrete patio and a cedar fence to serve as a backdrop. Choose the best site for trees, shrubs, lawns and flower beds making sure to create a focal point, one where the eye will naturally travel. Keep the lawn area small and design it away from the fence to avoid water puddles at posts. Make flower beds larger to accommodate a variety of shrubs and perennials, which use less summer water and add depth of view. Now give each planted area at least one gentle curve. If the lawn butts up against the concrete, keep that line straight and put the curve on another side. Make the front of the flower beds curved and let their back follow the fence line.

Plant selection: Choose drought tolerant plants that look good when grouped together. Their shapes and colors can vary, but tie it together with blending plants in neutral colors such as silver and grey. Foliage color, texture, and overall plant shape can be more important than flower color. Planting in groups at appropriate spacings will create waves of color and interest with less garden maintenance. Before purchasing, create mini vignettes of your plants at the nursery, talk over your ideas, or glance through the magazines and books, they are brimming with ideas.

Gardeners who plan outdoor living areas with our Mediterranean climate in mind and then choose plants adapted to our environment can have a beautiful garden with less work. Adopting regionally appropriate gardening techniques saves time, energy, and resources, and reduces air and water contamination from garden chemicals and power equipment. It's time to switch to sustainable landscaping.