Even during dry times, gardens can be beautiful

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Salvia, a highly drought-tolerant native plant, lends beauty to any Southern California garden. (Photo by Toni McAllister)

In the wake of continued dry conditions, low water-storage levels and court-ordered cuts in water deliveries from Northern California, this past spring the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California announced a reduction in water supplies to the Southland.

Reduced supplies have meant watering restrictions and higher water bills for many area residents. A green lawn in the Southland can carry a high price tag, but not all local gardeners are complaining.

Susan Frommer, a Tenaja resident whose sprawling hillside garden is vivid and lush despite dry hot summer days, said it's all about planting smart. Frommer, a retired science teacher and retired nursery grower of native and Mediterranean plants, is passionate about her garden but she only uses native and drought-tolerant plants-no water-guzzling turf grass. Shrub oak, sage, laurel and hundreds of other natives thrive in Frommer's yard.

"The natives are beautiful and there's a constant color palette throughout the year," she said as she looked over her garden, located in the hillside community west of Temecula near the Santa Rosa Plateau.

The kind of beauty Frommer talks about, however, is more than just superficial.

"Planting natives is a way of preserving California," she continued. "We have a unique chaparral ecosystem here, but we're at risk of wiping it out."

Frommer believes development is a primary destructor of native species, but said we can all make a difference in our own yards.

Frommer, who occasionally steps back into the classroom to teach courses on drought-tolerant gardening, strongly urges people to think before they plan and consider using natives and California-friendly drought-tolerant species. She said that in addition to preserving California's heritage, gardening with these types of plants saves time and money.

For starters, water consumption is drastically reduced. "Native plants need little water once they get started-a drip system is all that's required," Frommer said.

According to Peter Odencrans, senior public affairs officer for Eastern Municipal Water District in Perris, typical homes use more than 50 percent of their total water consumption outside - half of which is not needed.

"If people would try to work in, where possible, more California-friendly landscaping, they could cut up to half of their outside use," he said.

Odencrans recommends replacing lawns with native and drought-tolerant plants wherever possible.

"Keep just a minimal amount of lawn," he said. "In our climate, you need 45 inches of irrigation a year to keep a lawn looking good. That's in addition to annual rainfall."

Several native species require little to no irrigation, even during the summer months.

Removing turf grass and replacing with natives can also cut down on regular maintenance. Frommer said her maintenance is minimal: She clears undergrowth before fire season starts; she also prunes during the winter months but isn't scientific about it.

"My garden isn't perfectly tidy, and if I don't get to something that's ok," she said. "They all survive."

As for pesticides, they aren't in Frommer's tool shed. "Native plants are pest resistant," she said. "I basically have zero pest problems."

Fire risk is often a concern with native plants. Frommer said no plant-native or exotic–is fireproof, but some are more fire resistant than others.

According to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, some fire-resistant natives include Monkeyflower (Mimulus), California Lilac (Ceanothus), Sage (Salvia), and Common Yarrow (Achillea millefolium). Fire-resistant native trees include Coast Live Oak, California Sycamore, and Toyon.

"Use common sense," Frommer said. "Don't plant right up next to your house." She has a 10-foot-wide walkway around her home and nearby plantings are low and sparse. More dense foliage is further out from her home.

Frommer said that for those interested in planting natives, start with a plan and use available resources such as the California Native Plant Society [1].

"The biggest mistake people make is not having a plan first," she said. "Know what grows in your area and think about size-plant height and width. That tiny little plant might look adorable in its pot, but once it's in the ground it might turn into a 50-foot tree."

Fall is the ideal season to begin planting.

"After the first rain is best, but once nighttime temperatures dip and stay consistently low-in the 50s-and daytime temperatures hover in the 70s and 80s, you can plant," Frommer said. "If the ground is hard, you will need to simulate the rain by soaking the ground first."

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[1] California Native Plant Society: **http://www.cnps.org/**

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