

DRY gardens can be beautiful

Despite water restrictions it is still possible to have a beautiful garden.

KAREN HARDING looks at dry climate gardening and finds it not only saves water but saves you time.



The Drought. Everyone knows about it and no-one is untouched by it. Governments and businesses spend time and money looking for new ways to address water management throughout Australia. Households are legislated and encouraged to restrict their use of this precious resource. Everywhere, it seems, people are talking about water.

For many Australians, gardening is a pastime, a passion, a part of our way of life. Can this continue to be so, with water now in such short supply? The answer, simply put, is yes. But we need to change the way we garden.

The concept of dry climate gardening is not new. Indeed, it has been used in Australia for 20 years and more. But an increasing number of people are now turning to it as a gardening practice both to conserve water and also to make more efficient use of that other valuable commodity, time. It is a boon both to the keen gardener and to people with busy lives.

Australia forms 22% of the total Mediterranean climate regions of the world. There are five in all and while specific conditions within these regions vary, they all share a common feature: a short, mild, wet winter and a long, hot, dry summer. By choosing plants that originate from a climate similar to or even harsher than ours, as



The way to achieve this is by planning for a garden that is mostly at rest over summer but still kept attractive with interesting foliage. If you want colour, focus it in one or two places where you are prepared to water more, say one-third of your garden area. For the remainder, plan for an area that receives no water at all but natural rainfall and then another area which requires only minimal water just to get through the worst of the summer dry.

When it comes to plant selection, look for shrubs and perennials which have originated from places surrounding the Mediterranean Sea (such as Greece, Turkey and others), or South America, California, Mexico and South Africa, which has the most diverse number of species of all these regions. A comprehensive list of such plants is available on the Mediterranean Garden Society website.

In Victoria, the Garden State, David Glenn from Lambley Nursery, just outside of Ballarat, has a large display area devoted to the use of dry garden plants and his mail order catalogues have featured these plants for over 12 years. Increasingly, the nursery trade is following suit, with many now featuring plants with low water needs in their sales areas.

Main: Good soil preparation and judicious planting allowed Michael McCoy's Woodend garden to peak over summer and receive no supplementary watering even during drought. Inset: Plants from Mediterranean climates thrive in Australian conditions.

well as our own indigenous plants, we can still have a beautiful garden without either the time involved in watering or the use of water itself.

Plantsman Trevor Nottle has established three such gardens in South Australia. As a founding member of the International Mediterranean Gardening Society, he has a keen interest in plants from these parts of the world and has been delighted with the results.

To Nottle, a sensible garden is one in which we sit and enjoy summer rather than stand out in the heat trying to keep the garden alive. "You can still have flowers over the summer period in an Australian garden," he says. "Just not on the scale of an English flower garden."



Flowers and contrasting foliage provide interest in the dry climate garden.

Horticulturalist Tracey Linton from Native Visions, a garden design and maintenance business on the Mornington Peninsula, has also noticed the growing trend towards dry climate gardening. "When I first started gardening 11 years ago, no-one wanted native gardens. Everyone associated them with the 1970s bush gardens and wanted tidier gardens with box hedges and Iceberg roses," she says. "People wouldn't believe that they could still have lots of colour using plants such as proteas, dietes and native hibiscus. Now it is mostly what we do. And our clients just love the results."

To many people, the concept of dry gardening means using only natives or lots and lots of grasses. Gardening writer and designer Michael McCoy describes this as "an absolute furphy". McCoy created a magnificent dry garden at Woodend in the late 1990s and then wrote a book about the experience. To him, it makes sense to use plants that are either local or from climates similar to ours because these plants will not only survive but thrive.

But "the idea that this just means grasses is a fallacy and the sooner we get over it, the better," he says. "There is a huge range of perennials, shrubs, bulbs and even annuals that are very beautiful and that fit in with our traditional view of what a garden should look like."

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Of course, plant selection is not the whole story. Attention to your soil is a big part of good gardening practice. Dry climate plants will survive in the toughest of conditions but for

phenomenal success and bountiful results, a little extra goes a long way. Clay soils benefit from the addition of gypsum and claybreaking products. Hydrophobic soils, those that for various reasons now repel the very water we want them to retain, can be improved by any of the

wetting agents and soil improvers available at nurseries and garden outlets. Raising the humus level through the addition of organic matter, such as pea and other straws and aged compost, will aid moisture retention, as will using water-retaining products throughout the garden.

And mulch, mulch, mulch – preferably in early spring, to trap any winter rain. Opinions vary on the type of mulch to use – Glenn likes composted pine bark, McCoy chose gravel for his Woodend garden (though largely for aesthetic reasons) while Linton and Nottle, whose own soil he describes as "dreadful", both employ "zero waste", in which prunings and trimmings are shredded and returned to the garden.

So, modern gardening comes down to this: appropriate horticulture. Plants native to difficult areas survive because they have adapted to do so. In short, they are hardy, strong and tough. Their water needs through summer are minimal and their maintenance requirements are lower.

In these days of global climate change, which in Australia is exacerbated by an El Nino weather pattern, this is now a primary requirement for domestic gardens. And for busy people on the go, it means time spent in the garden is time spent enjoying the garden, not being a slave to it. Dry climate gardening is good news all round. ■

DRY CLIMATE GARDENING

FURTHER READING:

- Michael McCoy's Garden, by Michael McCoy
- Plants For Mediterranean Climate Gardens, by Trevor Nottle

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Mediterranean Garden Society – www.mediterraneangardensociety.org
- Lambley Nursery – Lesters Road, Ascot, Victoria. (03) 5343 4303
- Native Visions – Melbourne. 0409 523 247 or 0418 136 299