

LEARNING MADE EASY



Low-Water Landscaping

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Discover watering
tricks that conserve

Explore clever and practical
dry-landscaping and planting ideas

Find out about beautiful
low-water plants

Teri Dunn Chace

Award-Winning Horticulture Author



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by Teri Dunn Chace
Award-Winning Horticulture Author

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Introduction

There comes a day when you reckon with the state of your yard. Your lawn is turning brown and the other plantings look distressed. Meanwhile, your water bill creeps higher, and the news about low reservoirs and depleted aquifers grows more alarming. You look up at the blue, cloudless sky, you look down at the dry sights around you, and you wonder what to do.

This book is here to help you adapt to the reality of low water in your landscape. I assure you, you can act in many ways.

You can make all sorts of tangible changes, like taking steps to help your garden ground retain water better and to reduce runoff.

You can tackle a project as large as installing an in-ground irrigation system and as seemingly minor as planting some attractive native wildflowers in the part-day sheltering shade of a boulder or wall.

You can try clever innovations pioneered by gardeners who grow crops in arid regions, from using strategically placed clay pots or pipes to get water right into root zones to creating watering zones to positioning thirstier plants on the downhill side of a slope.

You can — once and for all, no more dithering — take out that scraggly lawn and not look back.

It's time to explore and install a whole new range of (yes, beautiful!) plants that are adapted to minimal water.

I promise you the results won't look barren and scrubby; the landscape will come alive as you shift your approach and change the ways you plant and maintain everything. Now it's time to stop fretting, delve in, and do it. Soon you'll be delighted with your yard's new, improved look — and proud and relieved that it was accomplished while consuming substantially less water.

About This Book

Low-Water Landscaping For Dummies provides you a mixture of ideas, step-by-step instructions, and answers to practical questions like:

- » How do I stop water from running off and away from my yard?
- » Which dry-adapted plants are the most durable, most colorful, most long-blooming?
- » What's the best method for installing and watering a new plant?
- » Is there a better way to deliver water to my plants?
- » Is there a way to landscape with large and small rocks that doesn't look like a gravel pit?
- » What's involved in removing a lawn? What are suitable replacement plants?
- » What material makes a good mulch and how thick should I apply it?
- » When's the best time of day to water and why?
- » What's the best way to install a dry streambed so it looks natural?
- » How should I collect rainwater?
- » What is gray water, and is it safe to use in the yard?
- » What's the best way to raise edible plants with limited water? What are the recommended plants?
- » Are there tricks for watering moisture-greedy potted plants?
- » Can I add a water feature without consuming a lot of water?
- » What is xeriscaping, and how can I apply its principles to my own yard?

This handy guide addresses all of these matters and more — no question is too elementary, no concern too trivial! This book also gives you a handle on the best practices and explains what has worked best for others in similar situations.

As you proceed through this learning curve, you'll find a common and reassuring theme: Being careful and frugal with outdoor water use leads to a successful home landscape. I'm here to help you get the groove on!

Cultivated varieties (*cultivars*) have been chosen or developed for superior or alternative qualities; some call these selections *nativars*. In the lists in this book, I indicate these in 'single quotes' because that's the industry standard, in web listings, catalogs, and nursery tags.

Foolish Assumptions

When writing this book, I've made a few assumptions about you, dear reader:

- » Plants you've installed in the past have struggled and failed, and you're tired of wasting money and effort. You wonder what you've been doing wrong and/or what would be better choices.
- » Boring "desert dot" (you know, a spread of gravel with an occasional succulent plunked in at random) landscaping doesn't inspire you. Sure, it's probably low-maintenance, but it also isn't very attractive.
- » Although you've seen colorful dry-climate gardens, you don't have a clue where to begin, in terms of plant selection and plant placement.
- » You're fed up with your lawn and its many demands, but you're not sure what you can or should do next.
- » You want to fashion a landscape where you can actually sit outside and enjoy the sights and sounds. Perhaps a bit of cooling shade . . .
- » Landscaping in an ecologically sensitive way appeals to you, but you don't know how or where to begin.
- » You've experienced success with DIY indoor projects and feel ready, willing, and able to tackle a water-wise approach in your yard, but you need guidance and information.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, you can find icons — small pictures next to the text that point out extra-important information. Here's what they all mean:



TIP

For gems of accumulated wisdom — quite often the kind learned by painful experience! — follow this icon.



WARNING

Consider this icon like a stop sign: When you see it, stop and pay extra attention, because I only use it to help you avoid serious mistakes or bodily harm.



REMEMBER

You're trying to work correctly and efficiently *and* to be sensitive to the environment. Problem is, you may not always know what's right and what isn't. This icon steers you in the proper direction.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon highlights the jargon and concepts that are interesting but not essential to understanding low-water landscaping.

Beyond This Book

This book is chock-full of tips and other pieces of helpful advice you can use as you tackle water-wise projects and make water-wise choices. If you want additional tidbits of wisdom, check out the book's Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com. Just search for "Low-Water Landscaping For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

If you're excited about making good and practical changes in your landscape and the creative juices are starting to flow, flip through the index or Table of Contents to find a subject that interests you.

Or you can turn to whatever section looks to have the answers and information you're wanting most, whether it's Part 2's descriptive plant lists, Chapter 16's tour of mulches, or Chapter 15's instructions on how to install an attractive dry streambed. Later you can backtrack to the lowdown on rain barrels (Chapter 2) or divert to my tips for potted plants (Chapter 17). In trawling through Part 3, you may surprise yourself by being drawn to the updated information about artificial turf in Chapter 13.

When you're ready, put on your hat and sunscreen, roll up your sleeves, and let me empower and guide you into water-wise landscaping. It's easier than you think and more gratifying than you can imagine.

1 Getting Started with Low-Water Landscaping

IN THIS PART . . .

Assess your yard's water needs and then work to reduce them.

Consider the various ways to collect and harvest usable water.

Find out about low-tech watering aids.

Discover the best time of day to water.

Improve your soil for improved water retention and plant health.

Survey the details of in-ground irrigation systems.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Coming to terms with low-water realities
- » Landscaping to conserve precious water
- » Letting go of the traditional lawn
- » Discovering suitable plants and savvy landscaping ideas

Chapter **1**

Lacking Water? No Problem

This book is all about landscaping with less water. No matter whether you're trying to sustain an established yard in a desertlike climate or you're wishing to make changes while adjusting to a limited or unpredictable water supply, the message is the same: You can do it!

Having a beautiful landscape isn't just nice, it's also important. The plants in and around the area are more than décor, they're alive — even in times when water is scarce. We humans are bound in a relationship with them, not just for the pleasurable beauty or fragrance they may provide as we come and go from our home or hang out in the yard, and not just for the other creatures they help sustain (from pollinators to birds). We're also elementally bound together by the shared, interdependent, natural cycles of air — the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen — and water, the stuff of life as we know it.

When water is rationed or in short supply, when rain is a rare event, when we constantly hear dire stories about falling reservoirs and depleted aquifers, we worry. We should worry. Water is precious and vulnerable to human demands as well as forces that feel beyond our control, like weather patterns and macroclimate change.

And yet, having an attractive yard isn't a foolish wish, nor is it a luxury. Your yard is part of your home and part of the big picture of the larger landscape.

Rather than giving up, adapt. Become a good steward. This chapter gives you a brief overview of what you can do. Find out how to conserve water, how to better deliver it to wisely chosen plants, and how to keep it all healthy and beautiful.

Defining Low-Water Landscaping

Low-water landscaping is using less water, more efficiently.

Sustaining home landscaping on less water isn't mysterious. Many excellent techniques and ideas come from farming and agriculture. And of course research is continuing.

Certain water-conserving ideas from agriculture translate well to smaller and more intimate settings, whether you only have a courtyard or balcony, or you're trying to maintain a half-acre or more around your home. Also other gardeners have developed clever, effective ways to successfully nurture many plants with less water.

This book is here to help. I explore low-tech watering aids and ideas in Chapter 3 and delve into various irrigation systems you may wish to consider in Chapter 5.



REMEMBER

You don't need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. Plenty of trial and error and research, worldwide and over many centuries, has yielded innovative and practical ways to install and care for plants.

Here I begin by taking a closer look at where you can reduce water use and how. Not every suggestion will apply — but many will! Conserving is a matter of examining every opportunity.

Seeing where it makes sense to implement

There are many places and times where saving water can (and should) be possible. These include the following:

- » Where getting water to your yard and plants is difficult or complex
- » Where the water supply is expensive/where water bills just keep going up and up

- » Where the water source is uncertain: unreliable, depleted, or drying up
- » Where rainfall is unpredictable, sparse, or briefly seasonal
- » Where water rationing is mandated and enforced
- » Where the landscaping you do have is suffering from lack of water
- » When you don't have time, funds, or the energy to fuss over your yard
- » When you're ready for a change to more responsible and creative landscaping

Understanding why being water-wise is important

Global climate-change weather models suggest that severe droughts may not be occasional anomalies to endure but become the norm — sobering news. Therefore confronting the situation and being proactive about your water use is imperative.



REMEMBER

Should things improve or monsoon rains be generous, well, the good habits and practices you develop ought to stay in place anyway. Wasting water is a careless habit; conserving water shows respect for life itself, starting with the plants and creatures inhabiting your yard and also respect for your neighbors and neighborhood, your municipality, and your bioregion.

Leveraging your water sources

Part of water-wise gardening is gathering all the water you can and sometimes storing it to use with care later — in other words, maximizing your supply. You may be surprised by some of these useful ideas (check out Chapter 2 for starters):

- » Start monitoring how much water your garden needs and uses.
- » Install one or more rain barrels.
- » Collect and store water in a cistern or tank.
- » Use gray water. *Gray water* isn't all of your household water, but rather the sources of relatively clean consumption, such as sinks, showers, bathtubs, and even the washing machine (not the toilet or utility sink). Some municipalities regulate the use of gray water and, of course, you don't want to use certain soaps or cleaning agents, which would make the re-used water unsafe or unsuitable for your plants or soil.
- » Route or reroute drainage from your roof. Study and route or reroute drainage out in your yard (see Chapter 16).

- » Put in a *rain garden*, a garden area set up in a low area where rain pools or where you can divert your rain gutters (details in Chapter 16).
- » Find out whether your municipality has *reclaimed* water, which is water that has been treated but isn't meant for drinking/not potable. They may be using it to irrigate city parks and other public places, but it may also be possible to access it for your personal landscape.

Eliminating wasteful watering practices

A series of seemingly minor changes in your watering habits can help. Here are a few suggestions:

- » **Prevent runoff.** Don't overwater, don't water too long, and help water soak in so plants can use it. It begins with good soil, actually; read and heed Chapters 4 and 16.
- » **Create watering basins around individual plants.** Chapter 3 explains how to make one, with a helpful illustration.
- » **Create water-need zones by grouping plants with similar needs together so you can water them together.** More in Chapters 3 and 10.
- » **Water when chance of evaporation is lowest.** A full explanation and discussion — including myth-busting — is in Chapter 3.
- » **Hold water in the ground around your plants by mulching.** It's cheap, it's easy, and it's tremendously effective. Consult Chapter 15.



REMEMBER

Just to get on the Mulch Soapbox for a moment: Anyone can mulch their plants and everyone, especially those needing to conserve water, should! Mulch has profound benefits. Mulch prevents evaporation, which is huge because most plant roots are fairly close to the soil surface. Mulched plants need water less frequently and stay fresh-looking longer after a watering. Mulch also helps keep weeds at bay, and weeds are notorious for stealing water and nutrients from your desired plants.

- » **Choose watering gear wisely.** Replace old-model sprinklers and sprinkler systems with some amazingly efficient new technology. A wide range of items and networks deliver water directly to the roots of your plants (and not to the sidewalk and gutter!). Review your options in Chapters 3 and 5.



TIP

Like to grow and display plants in containers, but you've definitely noticed that they're more water-intensive than plants in the ground? Good news: You can get the needed water to potted plants without waste or worry. Among the options are clever self-watering pots and water-holding crystals added to potting soil. See Chapters 15 and 17 for more details.

Replacing Impractical Plants with Practical Ones

If you're honest with yourself, you already know that your yard — including but not limited to your lawn — has some plants that aren't doing so well these days. Not enough water is obviously their problem. They're getting to be too much trouble and expense to maintain.

To be blunt, the solution is obvious. Out with the old, in with the new! I want to reassure you that not only can you make changes, but you can also embrace changes by making smart and creative choices that will look great. Keep reading for some general suggestions.

Getting rid of your lawn

Taking out your grass feels like the end of an era . . . because it's the end of an era. Green lawns suck up a lot of resources, mainly water but also fertilizer and perhaps weedkillers (all of which can be harmful to wildlife, your environs, and groundwater) — not to mention all your own effort and sweat in mowing and clipping. And what's the point if water is limited and no matter how hard you try, it doesn't look as lush as you want?

Completely removing your lawn isn't as hard as you might think. Lawn grass isn't deep-rooted, and you can dig it up and peel it away like a thick old carpet. You can also get rid of a lawn by tarping, solarizing the area, or undertaking sheet or "lasagna" mulching. Chapter 11 provides full instructions, details, and tips.



REMEMBER

After the deed is done and you've removed your grass, you'll have a clean slate, an area of open space, presumably in full sun and in full view of you and your neighbors. This is a brand-new landscaping opportunity! Yes, look at this transition as pivoting to a new and better way — because it is.



WARNING

While you're contemplating your next steps, don't leave bare, exposed ground. Weeds — those hardiest and most resilient of all plants, even in dire drought conditions — will invade. The saying “Nature abhors a vacuum” is never truer than when a spot is freshly cleared. Just cover over the area until you're ready to re-landscape and replant (see Chapter 11 for a rundown of effective temporary barriers).

Considering lawn alternatives

You have a lot of options for alternatives, depending on the size of the space, your budget, and your energy. I recommend not only that you study the more in-depth discussion in Chapter 12, but also do a little (fun and inspiring) research by looking at how others in your neighborhood and region have dealt with lawn replacement.

Meanwhile, the following can jump-start your thinking:

- » **Put in a native drought-tolerant grass or grass blend.** True, your lawn won't look like a golf green, but it may serve as a pretty and quite water-wise new installation. A plus: These types of grasses look more harmonious and natural, rather than out of place.
- » **Consider ornamental grasses.** Unlike turf grasses, ornamental grasses are clump-formers, so they tend to be taller and need to be planted more closely if you're still wanting broad coverage. You can clip or mow to maintain a desired height.
- » **Install a meadow.** Full disclosure — installing a meadow takes soil preparation, careful selection of a balance of flowering plants and native grasses, and some regular maintenance to keep it looking nice. It's gardening; you can't just sprinkle a can of meadow mix and be done. However, the results can be gorgeous and gratifying, and the area definitely will consume very little water once established.



WARNING

Some municipalities and homeowner associations are still reluctant to allow or approve of meadow gardens, particularly in front yards or areas clearly visible from the street.

- » **Put in a groundcover.** Plenty of plants certainly can fill in and cover up a broad area and look terrific. Some introduce different shades of green and other colors (and/or seasonal color changes, which can be lovely) to your home landscape. Chapter 7 has an annotated list of carpeters to consider.

THINK OUTSIDE THE GRASS BOX

Other ideas for an area once devoted to a lawn go beyond what you may have originally imagined. What about these solutions?

- **Lay down a base of gravel and rocks.** But do it right. Make sure water can get through and weeds are minimized. Explore different colors, sizes, and textures. Place larger rocks so they look natural and perhaps also serve a practical purpose, such as sheltering small plants vulnerable to wind. Chapter 14 can give you the ideas and information you need to proceed, including attractive planting suggestions.
- **Put in a terrace, patio, or deck.** In the case of a terrace or patio, instead of a slab, explore the new permeable options that allow you to tuck in low-growers like creeping thyme between pavers and also help filter water through your landscape rather than letting it run off. Check out Chapter 16.
- **Take a fresh look at artificial turf.** Don't scoff — cruddy ole Astroturf is a thing of the past. Artificial turf has experienced a major boom in recent years, thanks to new materials, technologies, options, and installation savvy. Consult Chapter 13 for more details. Such a lawn won't use water at all, except perhaps for an occasional rinse-off!



TIP

Don't be succulents-averse. There are more options than you may realize, and mixing and matching can also supply impressive, beautiful, and effective coverage.

Checking Out Suitable Ornamental Plants

A brave new world of exciting ornamental plants (grown for beauty and decoration) is available for low-water settings. In fact, never before in the history of gardening has there been such a broad selection of appropriate choices! The chapters in Part 2 are full of descriptive lists of water-wise plants. The lengths of the lists and the information, I hope, will be an eye-opener.



REMEMBER

Newly installed plants, of any kind, need and deserve a good start, especially ones billed as drought-tolerant. Once planted properly — see the guidance in Chapter 10 — they'll need extra water for at least their first year to help their root systems get established. After that, count on them to become much more self-sufficient.

Before looking at — and falling for — individual plants, get oriented. These sections describe the many different kinds and then delve into ways to tell if any given plant that catches your fancy will be a good choice for your low-water landscape.

Looking at the different types

The following are the general categories. Rest assured you can find many choices within each type that do well in low-water settings:

- » **Perennials:** These plants bloom year after year, often increasing in size or spreading out. Many are flowering, and you can pick ones to have colorful gardens at different times of the growing year.
- » **Annuals:** Although these plants live for only one growing season (hence the name), they deliver a lot of color and many are truly tough, standing up to heat and drought.
- » **Succulents:** Sure, these are a dry-garden cliché, but let me reassure you that your choices are endless. Get away from the ordinary and have fun!
- » **Shrubs:** Some bushes are good for hedges, some work well all on their own. Some have attractive needles or leaves, some change color with the seasons. Some flower and fruit. They always bring substance and heft to any home landscape.
- » **Trees:** They provide shade and beauty. The trick is to select ones appropriate to your climate and of a size that works for your yard.
- » **Vines:** Don't forget vines, which can grow quickly and drape over fences and other supports to add beauty of foliage and flower — at eye level or even higher. Some also produce fruit or attractive seedpods.



TIP

Ideally, you want some of everything in order to create a diverse home landscape. Variety keeps your yard interesting in all seasons.

Identifying appropriate plants

Any good plant nursery or garden center has a lot to offer, but you can't always be sure that everything is water-wise. Fortunately, recognizing the features of dry-land plants isn't difficult when you start shopping around.