

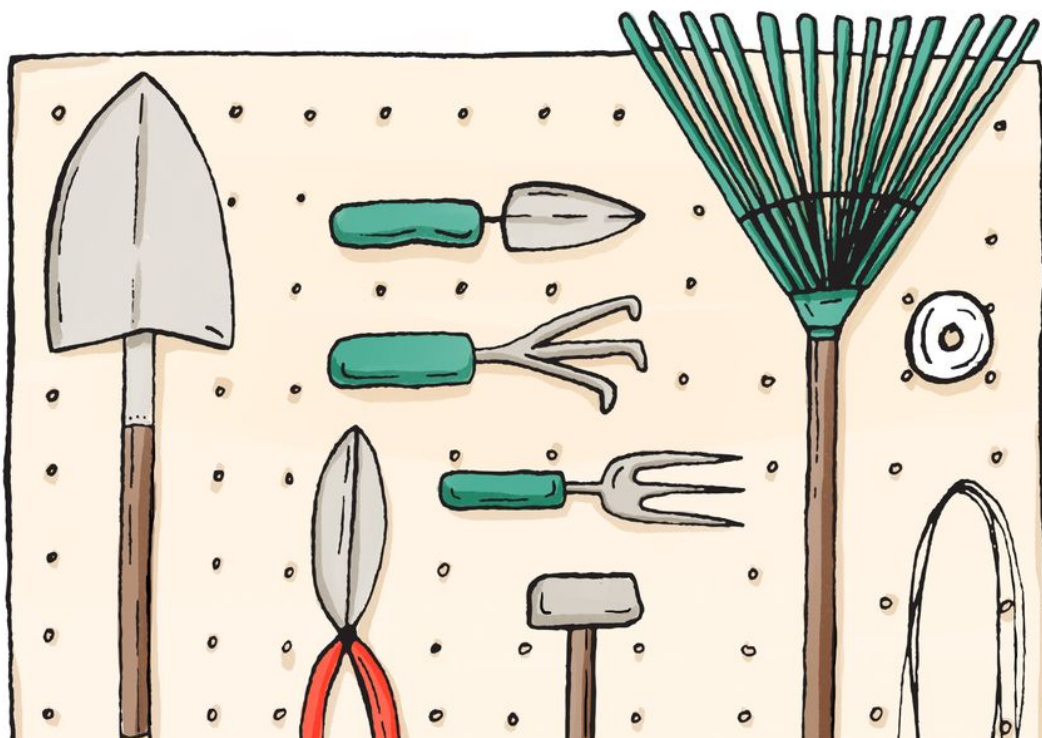


curbed.com

Drought-tolerant gardens: Expert tips and tricks

We talked to landscape architects who work their magic in southern California's dry climes

by Kate Losse Oct 11, 2016, 1:35p



Even in our succulent-obsessed times, many people feel intimidated by and unsure about the idea of drought-resistant landscaping. For some, the notion of drought-tolerant landscape still conjures a drab vision of plain gravel with a few sparse plants. But with the growing trend in artful and verdant low-water landscaping, not to mention municipal incentives for reducing water use, drought-resilient gardening makes great aesthetic and economic sense.

We've interviewed some top landscape architects in southern California on the key steps to create a garden that looks beautiful—and even lush—while remaining environmentally sustainable.

Location: where is your garden?

Before you get started with the process of designing a garden, it's crucial to understand the conditions of the land where you are going to plant. First, figuring out what "plant zone" you are in will help you find out what plants will do well in your garden.

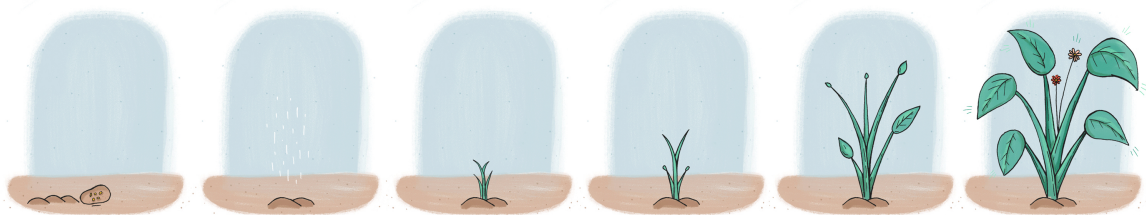
Other important local factors include your soil's mineral content, how much shade or slope there is, and whether the drainage is adequate. "The first thing for any project is to take a look and understand what the specific site conditions are," says Judy Kameon, who founded the Los Angeles-based design firm Elysian Landscapes. "Is it sunny, is it shady, is it coastal, is it inland? Is it flat or is it hillside? Understand what the conditions are that you have and then you can pick climate appropriate plants."

But choosing climate-appropriate plants doesn't necessarily mean that a drought-tolerant garden has to be arid. "I might start by reassuring someone that a drought tolerant garden can be beautiful. I like to think about it as not so much drought-tolerant as 'resilient,'" says landscape architect Susan Van Atta, whose firm Van Atta Associates, Inc., Landscape Architecture + Planning is based in Santa Barbara.

Van Atta advises gardeners to "look at what grows in nature itself where you live. Here in Santa Barbara, there are plants that look gorgeous and green even when it gets very hot and very dry." If assessing soil and other conditions in your garden plot sounds daunting, a landscape designer can assess the conditions for you and provide expert guidance.

Use: How do you plan to use the garden?

For Van Atta, the question of how you will *use* your garden should be a primary part of the design process. "Look at what you'd like to have happen there; you are making places for people," Van Atta says.



Designing with usage in mind can even help to reduce water waste. "Often, creating new uses for the landscape will displace water-using plant materials," Van Atta notes, citing the example of her firm's Santa Barbara County Bowl project, where a sloping green lawn was replaced with a flat surface of decomposed granite and flowering native plants that allow the space to be used for events, rather than sitting unused. "It's prettier now because it's more interesting with flowering plants in the place of a boring lawn."

Research & Explore

Whether you are working with a landscape designer or creating a garden yourself, it's a good idea to spend some time visiting nurseries and reading (either online or in books) about gardening in water-restricted areas. Armed with the knowledge of what zone your garden is in and what its conditions are like, you can then peruse the plants at nurseries and in literature to find out what types of viable plants you like.

"When you get into plant selection, that's the fun part," says Pamela Palmer, president of Venice, California-based landscape architecture firm ARTECHO. "We advocate creating a plant palette that is based on plant association—in other words, plants that grow together in a similar habitat and have similar needs."

"I always tell people to do your homework. Before you start madly buying plants and putting them in the ground, make sure you are buying the right plant and putting it in the right spot," advises Kameon. Palmer mentions that you can also incorporate plants that occupy similar climates in different areas of the world, such as the Mediterranean climates of South Africa and Australia, which are very similar to Southern California.



Design

Once you have figured out which types of plants will grow well in your garden and what plants you like, you are ready to create the design of the garden. "Another thing to remember is you'll use the same design principles for a drought-tolerant landscape as for any other landscape—you use plants in the same way, but just different plants," Van Atta says. When you begin designing, it may be useful to look at landscaping designed by professionals to gather aesthetic inspiration.

Kameon, who with her partner Dana Bauer designed landscaping for the Platform in Culver City, conceived the design of the landscaping there to reflect elements of the site's architecture. "We had a lot of hard materials with concrete and metal, so we

carried that through to the planting, so the planting is very much based on foliage, color, texture, and strong silhouettes."

In addition to plant selection, you may also choose to incorporate hardscaping, fencing, and other elements into your garden design. In fact, in some municipalities, regulations require homeowners to install permeable hardscape elements on the ground that prevent local rainfall from being lost into storm drains.

But even when required, the options for hardscaping are vast, from gravel to

shale to decomposed granite. The garden design store Big Red Sun in Venice sells a variety of hardscaping stones, planters, dishes, and steel vessels in a garden setting, and visiting these types of stores can be another good way to gather ideas.

Observe, Water, Repeat

Once your garden is designed and planted, the relationship you have with your garden really begins. Experts caution that just because a garden is drought tolerant doesn't mean it doesn't need attention, and that paying attention to your garden and its needs is a crucial element to its growth.

“‘Drought tolerant’ doesn’t mean no water. It means plants can survive with little water, but it doesn’t mean they will necessarily thrive,” says Kameon. Palmer says, “Even if you are planting natives or low-water plants they need water while their roots are establishing, and then you can back off and water less. So the key is observing.” Kameon advises, “Try to be patient. Allow plants the time and space to grow in. For me, that’s part of the pleasure of the garden, how it grows and changes over time.”

