



TOWARDS A WATER EFFICIENT GARDEN



ABOVE: Gazanias and catmint (*Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant') manage to thrive in dry summer conditions. BELOW LEFT: Miscanthus and echium dry off after spring and give the garden a brownish glow. BELOW RIGHT: Dried cardoon heads. OPPOSITE PAGE: The Solanum family has many tough survivors.



STORY AND PHOTOS: WILLIAM MARTIN

Many of us are endeavouring to forge a more sustainable approach to our domestic gardening, which relies less on that precious and increasingly rare commodity water. *William Martin* gives a personal perspective on how to achieve this

The so-called “waterwise” garden has become the catchcry of the last dry decade as droughts impact heavily on the water supplies that many of us are almost entirely reliant upon. All manner of stopgap horticultural practices have been implemented in the hope that maybe this “dry” will soon go away, and we can then get back to the “real” ways of gardening. But no amount of “unsustainable” organic mulch will solve the deep-rooted imbalance of our traditional garden ways.

The most effective solution to all our

water woes is incredibly simple. Choose the right plant types for your given growing conditions and area and the rest will fall into place. Now that sounds far too simplistic... *and it is!* Get your garden right for the worst time of the year and all will be well. High spring is always a magical time, wherever you might live, but to extend some of that magic year round is far more satisfying.

I am convinced most gardening articles in our press are highly misleading and much too precious; nothing looks quite so good in most people’s reality. (Think

of all those fantastic shots that are taken on “good hair” days on “eye-candy” TV programs.) Aim a little lower than all that high gloss and gush. Your garden is yours, not a carbon copy of stage set landscapes all manicured and clichéd within an inch of their life.

One of the great failings of the domestic garden is the overplanting of ground-hogging trees and shrubs. Sure they are the “best” value—they live long and often need little in the way of pampering—but at a cost, as they rob the soil of many available nutrients and soil moisture,



and render your space and your neighbour's space largely unproductive. While creating valuable shade in the hotter months, this woody overuse is highly detrimental to many other lesser plants you may wish to grow, with the exceptions of some of the cast-iron evergreens.

Organic mulch, in all its forms, has been heavily promoted by many as the water-saving saviour. The general effect of this material is merely to relocate available moisture higher up in the soil profile than it ought to be. This in turn trains plants to raise their roots, seeking moisture and nutrients in the immediate area beneath the mulch. The net effect is a softer plant heavily reliant on this unnatural layer. Evaporation is reduced slightly, but the main loss of moisture is from transpiration (the plant sweating). No amount of mulch will arrest this natural process. The true object of waterwise gardening is to plant the types of plants that *do not* require the absurdly lavish use of an unsustainable resource.

A great argument often made by

fervent mulchers is that the use of this material is a healthy recycling of waste products (pine-bark etc). However, thought should be given to the considerable environmental impact of transporting this material from far flung places to our major cities to satisfy home gardeners' needs, which include diesel fuel and road fatigue. The impact of soil acidification and groundwater contamination are other negatives to consider in its use.

Most soil types create natural mulch in warmer weather to seal in available moisture. The top half inch or so of the soil surface "crusts". This is more than adequate for the purposes of moisture retention. Organic toppings can be employed as a one-off weed suppressant (its most positive attribute) for the establishment of living groundcover.

Employing lower level planting as a living blanket to cool the soil (thus reducing evaporation slightly) is easily the most effective (and attractive) type of mulch. So, too, the use of "local" mineral toppings; though initially more

Recommended reference books

- * *Gardens of the Sun*
Trevor Nottle (AU)
- * *Shrubs and Trees for Australian Gardens* (AU)
EE Lord
- * *Handbook of Trees and Shrubs* (NZ)
Richmond E Harrison
- * *Australian Native Plants* (AU)
John W Wrigley & Murray Fagg
- * *Handbook of Bulbs and Perennials for the Southern Hemisphere* (NZ)
Richmond E Harrison
- * *ALL Pan Books* by (UK)
Martyn Rix & Roger Phillips
- * *Perennial Garden Plants* (UK)
Graham Stuart Thomas



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' finds company with an unknown cactus and copper friend; *Plectranthus ecklonii*; *Kniphofia* species; Aloe; Chinese plumbago (*Ceratostigma willmottianum*). OPPOSITE PAGE: Pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*) flowers in spring and remains green through summer. Silvery wormwood (*Artemisia arborescens*) is a drought-hardy plant for dry climates.

yourwaterwisegarden

costly than its organic counterpart it, of course, does not need continual replacement.

Which plants can I use?

Home gardeners rely too heavily on advice given freely and do little research of their own. A small plant reference library for plant identification and cultivation help will always be a great resource. Observing and noting the plants that grow well around you is also valuable. Looking to our splendid range of specialist plant sellers to top up your local nursery range is an absolute must. Many suburban corner shop nurseries stock and sell plants that have a long shelf life (or quick turnover) and can withstand the deprivations of pot culture. In my experience, many of the best plants do not enjoy this pot culture. Filling your garden with “sexy” and fashionable commercial nursery plants is fraught with danger. Buyer beware of the tip-top, shiny, pot-grown nursery plant. It is pampered and groomed, and may not be of the variety suitable for water conscious gardening.

■ For more information and photographs of the writer's garden Wigandia, visit: www.wigandia.com; or contact: williammartin@wigandia.com; or phone: (03) 55925349.



Look for the best fit

Choosing the right plant for the given conditions is the key. New organisations help facilitate the better use of plant types for given regions. In the Sydney area the Designer Growers Network (DGN), spearheaded by passionate plantsperson Peter Nixon, aims to improve access to best fit plants. These are often tucked away in enthusiasts' nurseries. Its bigger aim is to facilitate the use of the right plants for the right place.

The creation of gardens using unsuitable plants, which require us to alter the growing conditions to suit the plant, is at the root of unsustainable gardening practices.

ABOVE: Spanish broom (*Spartium junceum*) (rear) growing with bear's breeches (*Acanthus mollis*). Gardeners should be wary of growing broom where it is a declared weed. LEFT: Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) and California fuchsia (*Zauschneria californica*).