JUST ADD (LESS) WATER

When a couple wanted to reduce the water consumption in their Southern California garden, they turned to landscape designer Judy M. Horton. Here, she shares the best practices for creating a beautiful, water-wise garden, wherever you live.

photographs by LISA ROMEREIN
text by MELISSA OZAWA
In an area that was once lawn, Harton planted a grove of California sycamores along with the native Heuchera maxima, which blooms profusely in spring. Next to the grove, she created a bed with two kinds of lavender—rosemary, and sculpted balls of germander (Tauronium fruticosum).
RETHINK THE LAWN

In its need for water, a lawn is similar to a gas-guzzling car. Horton removed most of it here, leaving only a portion in the back yard. In its place she expanded the planting beds, and she gave the remaining lawn a new function by dotting it with low-growing trees and low-water plants, such as rosemary, germander, and olive. She also planted more than 20 new trees, including a grove of native California sycamores underplanted with flowering hedges, and added hundreds of white-blooming amsonias, resplendent in autumn, to the existing birch grove.

Horton reduced the footprint of the thirstiest plants growing on the property— in other words, the lawn and the roses. Removing more than 10,000 square feet of lawn was “a no-brainer,” she said. But Dotzive also had a rose collection that she was quite fond of. “I thought it was a brave move to say, ‘Okay, you can take out most of the roses in the back,’” Horton recalls. She then set about designing a garden that celebrated the landscape advantages the Nashes already had—an existing landscape and a great selection of mature trees—and presented the couple with a new, more unified vision. Horton chose purple, pink, white, gray, and silver low-water Mediterranean-climate plants, including lavender, rosemary, germander, and olive. She also planted more than 20 new trees, including a grove of native California sycamores underplanted with flowering hedges, and added hundreds of white-blooming amsonias, resplendent in autumn, to the existing birch grove.

To replace the panels of lawn she had removed by the house, she laid down pea gravel as a mulch and created a romantic tapestry garden in one area and a formal olive-tree terrace by the master bedroom.

Six years after Horton’s plan was put into place, the water bills have indeed been reduced. “Installing a water-saving garden is a long-term project,” Dotzive says. (New plants, even low-water ones, can require some supplemental watering until established.) In addition to reducing their water consumption, the couple has also gone organic. “One of the exciting rewards is the natural life that has come into the garden,” says Horton. In summer, monarch butterflies arrive in full force to feast on milkweed. “You can’t go a day without seeing one,” says Dotzive. And while the Nashes entertain outdoors frequently—hosting cocktail parties and garden tours—Dotzive’s favorite time “is just sitting in the garden,” she says, “It is one of my greatest pleasures.”
RETHINK THE LAWN

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Norton knew she wanted to keep the area where she once lawn low and flat, so she created a tapestry garden of low-growing water-wise plants, including three Quinoa, four Dianthus, and a narrow bed of "Sens & Chics," that will intermingle as they mature in gravel. She also threw in a handful of taller "wild-card" plants, scattering poppies and everlasting seeds "for drama."

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BE CLIMATE-CONSCIOUS

Horton recommends growing regionally appropriate plants that are native to your area or have similar growing requirements to those of native plants that will thrive with your rainfall. At the Nashé, she planted the drought-tolerant succulent Echeveria sp., cubicles, which can bloom profusely from spring through fall, alongside a low, wide clipped hedge of the Australian native Heteropogon contortus.

CONSIDER GRAVEL

A classic design element in France and Italy, gravel occurs naturally and provides good drainage for plants while suppressing weeds. Horton used pea gravel as a base for a formal grid of four olive trees. As a focal point, she placed an antiqua stone sphere in the middle and surrounded it with spring blooming bearded irises. In the foreground, Spanish lavender complements them: a hedge of westringia provides a clean backdrop.
NO. 4

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PLANT TREES

"While trees need regular water initially, they are far less thirsty than a lawn and don’t need much water once established," says Horton. Plus, they create cool, shady areas, which helps with water needs in the long term. Horton added more than 20 trees to the Nashes’ garden, including California sycamores, olives, and birch trees, shown here.

To complement the white bark of the birches, she underplanted them with the Japanese anemone ‘Honorine Jobert,’ which blooms in fall.

Produced by
Melissa Ozawa
WATER-WISE AND WONDERFUL

"An important lesson is to garden where you live," says Horton, who strives to use only plants that will thrive where she's designing. Knowing your growing conditions will help you select the right plants. Lucky for you, there's a wide range of low-water plants available in all regions of the country, for every style of garden. These tough beauties should be able to handle some drought with aplomb.

**HENS AND CHICKS**

These low-growing succulents feature compact rosettes of leaves and require very little maintenance. Hardy to Zone 4, they do well in pots and in the landscape (even in poor soil), where they will propagate freely by runners.

**MULEIN**

Providing a strong vertical accent to a garden bed, this Mediterranean self-seeder prefers full sun and well-drained, rocky soils. The cultivar 'Southern Charm,' below, can reach three feet in height and should produce blooms from late spring through early summer.

**ERYNGIUM**

Also known as sea holly, this low-maintenance perennial thrives in hot, dry areas. Its thistlelike foliage (the silvery-blue bracts resemble petals) and flowers (the center cones) should keep their shape through fall.

**THYME**

With fragrant foliage and pale-purple flowers in summer, this culinary herb can handle some foot traffic and provide a soft ground cover in a tapestry garden. It prefers well-drained soil and is hardy to Zone 5.

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**GAURA**

Native to the southern U.S., this deer-resistant and sun-tolerant perennial will attract butterflies to its wispy spikes of white summer flowers. While it can handle some humidity, gaura does best in sunny, well-drained soil.

**CATMINT**

Fuss-free and strong, catmint (or nepeta) is a member of the mint family and features fragrant foliage and long-lasting flowers. The pinwheel-purple-flowered cultivar 'Walker's Low' is especially notable, tolerating the toughest of growing conditions.

**ARTEMESIA**

Deer- and rabbit-tolerant, this woody shrub is grown for its unusual feathery, silver foliage. A beautiful bedding plant, Artemesia silva full sun and looks radiant in a moon garden.

**AGASTACHE**

Attractive to pollinators, agastache (or hummingbird mint) is a showy perennial herb that has many cultivars and flower colors, including pink, orange, red, and purple. Once established, these deer-resistant plants prefer deep but infrequent watering.

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*Illustrations by Star Cross*