



## **Drought Decisions -- Setting Priorities in your Home and Landscape**

Robin Stanley

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

These days, many Master Gardeners are finding that wherever we go, people want to chat about how to cope with the drought. Recently, a gardening buddy shared her strategy. She said “I talk with my plants, and ask them if they are worth a five minute shorter shower.” After a good laugh, I asked her if I could quote her. Why? It’s because her response cuts to the chase of this article. We don’t yet know how extensive the drought will be. Will we receive some much needed rain? Will cooler days reduce evapotranspiration (loss of water through leaves) from our plants? We do know that 2013 was the driest year in California since record keeping began in the 1800s, and January 2014 broke all kinds of high temperature records in Sacramento.

So my suggestion for people is that they establish some priorities, for now and for the future. This means grabbing a pen and paper and walking around your landscape, whether it be lawn, ornamentals, vegetable beds, fruit trees, or some combination. Ask yourself: What matters most to me? Just as every home landscape differs, each person has a different idea of what is most important in his or her landscape and life.

For one person, it might be a well-producing orchard, with a wide variety of fruits that are eaten fresh, canned, dried or shared with neighbors or a local food closet. For someone else, it might be a prize rose garden, including Aunt Tillie’s Abraham Lincoln rose. For another, it might be the veggie garden, which is mostly annuals, but might also include some perennials like asparagus and artichokes. With water shortages in California, experts are predicting that food prices and availability may be drastically affected, so growing your own may become a bigger priority.

After identifying your most cherished plants and areas, you might next consider which of the plants would be the hardest to replace. A shade tree on the west side of your house might provide cooling that saves on air-conditioning costs in the summer. Its loss would come at a financial cost to you. If allowed to die, established orchards would take years to replicate. Many people have told me that they will let their lawn die, because if/when the weather changes, it would be fairly easy to replant. People are seriously considering reducing the size of lawns that they do keep. The topic of lawns leads to another question.

Which plants are most water-thirsty? Certainly lawns fall into that category. Most lawns require irrigation at least a couple times per week, and the nature of lawns necessitates some type of overhead sprinklers, which allow at least some of the water applied to blow or wash away. New plantings of any kind require water to get established. For drought-tolerant plants, that means regular watering for the first one to two years. For fruit or vegetable row crops, the necessary irrigation will depend on factors such as the kind of vegetable, the depth to which the soil has been worked, and the right combination of drip irrigation and mulch. For example, beans generally take less water than tomatoes, which can develop a long and extensive root system with deep and infrequent watering.

It's also important to consider your inside water use. Are you willing change the way you do laundry, wash dishes or shower, as my friend mentioned at the beginning of this article is? Tradeoffs that you are willing to make inside can give you water savings that could be utilized outside. Master Gardeners will be offering a class on greywater and rainwater harvesting (cross your fingers we get rain to harvest!) on March 22. Greywater is the use of household water from showers, bathroom sinks and wash machines for landscape irrigation. There are simple ways you can do this -- such as keeping a bucket in the shower to catch cold water as you wait for the hot water to arrive. Or you can actually modify your water lines to divert such drain water to a specific location or reservoir. Come to the class to find out what the regulations are regarding greywater systems, and what plants can successfully exist on greywater. In addition, we have lots of other classes coming up that will include water conservation tips and techniques. Take a look at the 2014 class schedule on our website to see what classes will suit your needs. In addition, check out the University of California website for horticulture at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/UrbanHort/>. Click on Water for Landscape Management and you'll find a wide variety of resources. We all will be in a position to make trade-offs this year. It's up to you to decide what works for you, both short term and long term.

But wait! There's more! I would also like to expand on a couple of commonly given hints that I believe are often incomplete. One involves the use of mulch. It is important to note that unless the water going to your plants is underneath the mulch (such as soaker hoses or individual drip emitters), or you are hand-watering individual plants by applying water right up by the base of the plant, you will actually have to water more in order for the water to penetrate the mulch and into your soil. Use mulch wisely, so you aren't disappointed. The second has to do with taking shorter showers. It's common to see advice to turn off the water while brushing your teeth. But what about turning off the faucet while you are shampooing or conditioning your hair? Voila -- you'll use less water without a "shorter" shower. Experts say you'll save 150 gallons/month, some of which you just might be able to use in your garden.

Fortunately, those of us who have EID water are in a much better position than many other areas in our region. But we still need to be proactive. Want to add your suggestions for saving water? Go online to the Mountain Democrat website, find this article, and share your pearls of wisdom in the comments section. Or you can comment on our Master Gardener Facebook page, which will feature this article the week that it runs in the Democrat. We'd love to hear from you.

Come out to the Master Gardener's free public education class this Saturday: "Propagating Plants by Seed." Selection and germination of seeds, seed starting media, planting containers, growing out, hardening off, transplanting seedlings, and common reasons for germination and seedling failure will be discussed -- to include hands-on demonstrations in the new Master

Gardener Demonstration Garden. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon on March 1<sup>st</sup> in the El Dorado Center Classroom, Room A-105, at Folsom Lake College, 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC Master Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.