

Tip of the Month

April *Water Wisely*

While landscapes planted with California native plants can thrive with 60% to 80% less water than “traditional” landscapes, plant selection alone isn’t a silver bullet; to realize those savings, we also have to adapt our habits and our expectations.

Water when it counts. Whether you water by hand or using automatic irrigation, the amount of water and the frequency with which you apply it should change with the seasons.

- **Extend the season.** The most effective use of water, particularly for California native plants, is to irrigate deeply and infrequently, and to use that irrigation mostly to bolster a sluggish start to the rains in fall, and to extend a fading rainy season in spring.
- **Let the seasons change:** Our local native plants are adapted to heat and drought; their response is to slow their growth, develop waxy coatings, or go into summer dormancy and wait for rain. While more water may keep them green longer, without their summer armor, they become juicy beacons for pathogens and for pests like deer and gophers.



Professional water managers use a soil probe to check that their irrigation is penetrating deep into the soil, where it can be accessed by the long roots of drought tolerant plants.

Water where it counts. No irrigation system is “set it and forget it”; even the most advanced automated system needs to be checked, particularly when we crank up the water in spring. Whether you don’t know the first thing about your irrigation system or you installed it yourself, here’s where to start to make sure you’re putting your water where it’s needed instead of down the drain.

- **Look at the pavement after an irrigation cycle.** It's an easy and intuitive step that is often overlooked. If the pavement or the gutter doesn't dry out between rain storms, you or your neighbor may have a problem.
- **Listen to your garden while the irrigation runs.** A leak could be as simple as a loose nozzle or as complex as a broken pipe. Either way, most leaks are audible, but only when your system is running. Unless you or your gardener take the time to run the system and listen, there's a good chance leaks will go undetected.
- **Repeat.** Check it regularly. Your water bill and your garden will thank you.

Clay soil that forms a ball when squeezed is still moist enough for drought tolerant plants to access water. In the height of summer, many of our local native plants can tolerate soil that's so hard and dry, you can't penetrate it with a soil probe or a shovel.



Sources and more information

<https://calscape.org/save-water>

Brought to you by the Portola Valley Conservation Committee