Seasonal Maintenance for the WaterSmart Landscape

EcoLandscape California
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An EcoLandscape California WaterSmart Guide
Congratulations!

You’ve made the switch from thirsty lawn to water efficient plants and may be wondering, “what do I do now?” You’ll be trading weekly mowing chores for a few focused seasonal tasks, leaving you with more free time for other activities or sit back and enjoy the beauty of your new garden.

The maintenance chores listed in this booklet are organized by season, but it is important to keep in mind that Mother Nature rarely follows our human calendar. For example, depending on the individual year, cold wintry conditions can last through March, or warm summer temperatures may linger into October. And as we know all too well, rainy seasons vary. Some years we get a lot of rain; others not so much. Some years, rainfall is spread evenly over many months; other times it comes all at once. You will have to adjust accordingly.

At the transition points between seasons, ask yourself what the weather has been like this year. Glance forward and backward between the seasonal lists and use your best judgment as to which chores should be done when, based on the current conditions.

Some of the tasks, such as weeding and testing your irrigation system, need to be done multiple times every year. Other chores, such as fertilizing, pest control and pruning, are done on an “as-needed” basis, and may not need to be done at all. It all depends on the plants in your individual landscape and your personal standards for garden tidiness and perfection.

Throughout the year, take time to enjoy and appreciate your new landscape, knowing that you have created a beautiful, sustainable habitat for yourself and the rest of the world.

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- Test your irrigation system and make any necessary repairs or modifications. Clean out filters on drip systems. Add emitters to plants that have grown larger since your drip system was installed (unless you have a grid system). Then wait until rains have stopped before turning irrigation on for the season.
- Hoe, hoe, hoe! Weeds grow like crazy this time of year. Hoe, hand pick or flame them before they have a chance to go to seed.
- This is the second best time of year to plant.
- Most California natives and other water-wise shrubs do not need or want fertilizer. Instead, apply high quality compost above the root zone of your plants to feed the beneficial soil organisms who in turn will maximize plant health and water efficiency.
- Roses and heavy-blooming perennials will appreciate the application of a slow-release balanced fertilizer. Make sure not to apply too much nitrogen because this will bring a flush of tender new growth that will attract aphids, thrips, slugs and snails.

Spring – March, April, May

- Add a new layer of mulch to refresh the look of your landscape, retain soil moisture and help prevent weeds. Mulch also insulates soil temperatures, maintaining a better environment for plant roots. Keep mulch 6” away from stems and trunks of plants.
- Keep an eye out for aphids. When they appear, knock them off plants with a strong spray of water. To help prevent fungal diseases, spray in the morning so that plants will dry completely before dark. If aphids persist, use an insecticidal soap spray.
- Control slugs and snails by trapping or hand-picking. If you prefer to use a chemical product, choose iron phosphate baits, which are less toxic to children, pets and wildlife. Sprinkle it in moist areas where you have seen snail and slug activity.
- Warm, moist nights can encourage fungal diseases. Watch for signs of rust or black spot and treat with a fungicide such as neem oil, potassium bicarbonate or sulfur. Always carefully follow the instructions on the product packaging.
- Shear or deadhead perennials after bloom to encourage repeat flowering.
- Prune spring-blooming shrubs after bloom, but only if necessary to shape or thin out old branches.
- Pinch back or lightly prune fall-blooming flowers like asters and chrysanthemums to promote bushiness and heavier bloom.

Summer – June, July, August

- Watch your irrigation system while it is running to check for leaks and ensure water is getting where it needs to go and isn’t running off.
- Get to know your soil and how water moves through it. After your irrigation system runs, use a soil probe or trowel to dig down and see how far water is penetrating. Adjust system run times accordingly. If possible, set controllers to run in multiple but short cycles to allow water to soak in. Watering should be done before 10 a.m. to avoid losing moisture to evaporation. To avoid fungal diseases, don’t water at night.
- Deep water trees once a month. As trees grow, add rings of emitters to the area beyond the dripline. A soaker hose may also be used.
- Deadhead plants to encourage repeat bloom. Remove individual spent flowers from perennials like daylilies. Shear subshrubs like lavender and santolina; selectively prune larger blooming shrubs like butterfly bush back to leaf nodes.
- Pinch back or lightly prune fall-blooming flowers like asters and chrysanthemums to promote bushiness and heavier bloom.
- Prune spring-blooming shrubs after bloom, but only if necessary to shape or thin out old branches.

- Keep an eye out for powdery mildew on crape myrtles. Treat it early by spraying it off with water, or applying a horticultural or plant-based oil or a product with Bacillus subtilis, following label instructions. Many newer varieties are resistant to powdery mildew.
- Spider mites and whiteflies are common summer pests. Remove infested leaves and treat plants by spraying with water, insecticidal soap or an oil such as neem oil.
- Relax and take it easy. This is the time that many climate-appropriate plants slow their growth or go dormant to protect themselves from the heat and lack of rain. So you can relax too!
• As days get shorter and cooler, reduce run times on your irrigation controller.

• Once regular rains begin, shut the irrigation system off entirely. Be prepared to water manually during prolonged dry spells, especially if it has been windy.

• Late September to mid-November is the best time to plant new shrubs, trees and perennials. Take advantage of native plant sales and end-of-season clearance at nurseries to enhance or “redecorate” your landscape.

• The best time to plant summer-blooming bulbs and scatter wildflower seeds is after rains begin.

• Assess your landscape. Are the plants performing as you expected? Are they in the right spot, or is a little design tune-up called for? This is the time to make any changes such as moving or replacing plants. It is also the time to divide crowded perennials.

• As rain returns, weeds will sprout. Hoe or hand pick them now while they’re small.

• Wait until November to cut back native perennials like matilija poppy, buckwheat, sage, artemisia and California fuchsia.

• Native bunch grasses will look tidier if you “comb” out the dead foliage with a metal rake.

• Refresh mulch if needed for erosion or weed control or to improve the appearance of the landscape. A thick layer of mulch will also help keep the soil and roots warmer through the winter.

• Rake and shred leaves to use as mulch or add to your compost pile—but only if they are disease free, otherwise they should be disposed of. Be especially careful to remove leaf debris from around the base crowns of plants; wet matted leaves can smother this critical area of the plant and encourage rot.

• Blow leaf debris out of dry stream beds. If allowed to build up, it provides a growing ground for weeds.

• Your irrigation system should remain off. If there are prolonged periods without rain, supplement by hand watering only if necessary.

• Cuttings from conifers, and California natives like toyon, coffeeberry and bay laurel are wonderful to use for holiday wreaths and garlands, and early December is a good time to trim them if needed.

• Protect frost-sensitive plants from cold nighttime temperatures by irrigating well before temperatures dip below freezing. Other protection measures include adding strings of incandescent lights or covering with a light cloth or frost blanket.

• Prune roses, crape myrtles, redbuds and other deciduous plants, removing dead, damaged or crossing branches.

• Clean up the garden by trimming spent perennials such as germander, catmint, yarrow, California fuchsia and Santa Barbara daisy to a few inches above the ground.

• If fungal diseases like black spot, powdery mildew and rust were a problem this past season, spray affected plants with a fungicide such as neem oil, potassium bicarbonate, sulfur or copper. Be sure to carefully follow directions and safety precautions on the product label.

• Continue to rake up fallen leaves, especially from around the base of plants. Throw out any diseased leaves. Blow debris out of rockscapes and dry stream beds.

• While deciduous plants are dormant, it is a good time to use preventative sprays to avoid pest problems during the growing season. Use a horticultural oil spray on plants that have had problems with scale, mites and aphids.

• Remove weeds now, before they mature and go to seed.

• To remove dead foliage on ornamental grasses, use electric hedge clippers, a bladed weed trimmer or pruning saw before new growth starts in the spring. Leave about 4” above the crown. Wear glasses, gloves and long sleeves to protect yourself from sharp edges.

• Plant bare root ornamental plants and summer-blooming bulbs if soil is not too wet. Try this test: form a small ball out of the soil. If it does not fall apart when you give it a light squeeze, wait a few days and check again before planting. Soil structure can be damaged by walking on or working wet soil.

• During the warm days of February, dig up and divide summer and fall-blooming perennials such as asters, chrysanthemums, and daylilies that have become overcrowded or are not blooming well.

The best time to plant summer-blooming bulbs and scatter wildflower seeds is after rains begin.
For further information:

EcoLandscape California
www.ecolandscape.org

University of California Integrated Pest Management Program
ipm.ucanr.edu

Our Water-Our World (least toxic pest management)
www.ourwaterourworld.org

University of California Master Gardener Program
mg.ucanr.edu