

Herbs in the Water-Wise Landscape

Water-Wise gardening is a concept whose idea has come—in fact, it’s past due. Most North Texans are acutely aware of water issues in our neck of the woods. We have experienced varying degrees of water restrictions. We know that water quality is a problem in addition to water quantity. Contamination of water sources remains a concern. We see the issues of planning for future water needs as our communities grow. And there’s always the “dollar factor.”

Although we’re beginning to see the “big picture,” we need to be aware that we as individuals are also part of the problem—and the solution. A significant percentage of our state’s water consumption is spent on our landscapes. So we can address these issues on a personal level—in our own back yards.

The seven steps of Water Wise gardening are a guide to reducing not only water use, but also the gardener’s time and money. The principles are interrelated and interdependent, and the maximum benefit is realized when all these principles work together.

1. Planning and Design: Measure and evaluate your space in terms of drainage, sunlight, wind and frost patterns, topography, fixed objects, etc.
2. Soil Analysis and Improvements: A soil test will help you understand the tilth and fertility of your soil. In most cases, organic matter (compost) should be added.
3. Practical Turf Areas: You can have your grass and enjoy it, too—but less grass also means less water and maintenance.
4. Appropriate Plant Selection: It’s time to be choosy. Poorly adapted plants are always a pain.
5. Efficient Irrigation: Old habits, like “a sprinkle a day,” die hard. Train yourself to water deeply and less frequently. Consider drip irrigation for efficient water use. Don’t water during the heat of the day.
6. Mulching: Do the right thing. Mulch reduces water evaporation and weed competition. It acts as a thermal blanket to moderate soil temperature, and slows the spread of soil-borne diseases.
7. Appropriate Maintenance: Make it easy on yourself. Choosing the right plant for the right place and following good cultural practices will save time and money in the long run.

Choosing water-thrifty plants for our landscapes is probably the step most gardeners look forward to—it’s fun to go shopping! The wonderful world of herbs—those useful plants valued for seasoning, medicine, cosmetics, fragrance, dyes, and so many other uses—are often great candidates for water saving gardens. Here’s the surprise: almost any herb can be included in a Water Wise garden if it is adapted to the region in terms of climate and soil type. If you carefully group plants with similar cultural needs, you can use water efficiently. Even relatively “thirsty” herbs can be grown in a small oasis area that receives more frequent irrigation, so you can have your basil and eat it, too!

Selecting drought tolerant herbs may seem confusing, but there are general characteristics common to many low water use plants:

- Plants with fuzzy leaves—the tiny hairs on the leaves retard moisture loss.
- Plants with silver or gray leaves—the coating on the leaves slows moisture loss.
- Plants with needle-like leaves or finely divided foliage have less leaf surface to lose water.
- Plants with very tiny leaves and a low-growing stature may lose less moisture to drying winds.
- Plants from certain regions, such as the Mediterranean, the American Southwest, parts of China, Australia or Mexico are often successful in dry soils. Plants from certain climates, like plains climates, are frequently good candidates as well.
- Plants with succulent leaves or stems, or deep taproots will conserve moisture.
- Strongly aromatic herbs may be drought resistant, since the essential oils they produce may slow moisture loss.

Popular Fragrant and Culinary Herbs

Lavender: *Lavandula* spp. (P, TP) Native to Mediterranean, Middle East, India. Demands excellent drainage, good air circulation, lots of sun. Subject to fungal diseases, “sudden wilts.” Many hybrids and cultivars. Some of the best named hybrids are ‘Provence,’ ‘Grosso,’ ‘Dutch.’ Some of the best English lavenders (*Lavandula angustifolia* cvs) are ‘Munstead’ and ‘Hidcote.’ French lavender (*Lavandula dentata*) is not reliably winter hardy. Spanish Lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*) doesn’t have a sweet lavender scent. Uses: Culinary, medicinal, fragrance, cosmetic, ornamental.

Marjoram: (*Origanum* spp. (P, TP) Native to North Africa, Mediterranean, Asia. Sweet Marjoram (*O. majorana*) is not reliably winter hardy. Pot Marjoram (*O. onites*) and Hardy Marjoram (*O. majoricum*) are not as sweetly perfumed. Uses: culinary, fragrance, cosmetic, dyes, good for borders, containers.

Mexican Mint Marigold: (*Tagetes lucida*) (P) Native to Mexico. Anise scented, clump forming, fall blooming perennial. Uses: culinary, medicinal, fragrance, ornamental.

Oregano: (*Origanum* spp.) (P, TP) Native to Mediterranean, Asia. Classification may be difficult because of so many varieties, hybrids, crosses. Some types have highly ornamental blooms. Uses: culinary, medicinal, good for borders, edging, containers.

Rosemary: (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) (P, TP) Native to Mediterranean. Upright forms such as ‘Arp,’ ‘Hill Hardy,’ ‘Dallas Hardy,’ will usually overwinter in North Texas. Prostrate forms are less hardy, but will often bloom more freely. Good

air circulation and avoidance of overhead watering will help prevent fungal diseases. Scents vary widely, from robust and piney to more subtle, flowery undertones. Uses: culinary, medicinal, fragrance, cosmetic, ornamental.

Sage: (*Salvia* spp.) (A, B, TP,P) Worldwide distribution. Great range in growth patterns—900 species! Garden sage, *Salvia officinalis*, is the familiar culinary sage, requiring excellent drainage, sunshine and good air circulation to avoid “sudden wilts.” ‘Berggarten’ Sage is a good cultivar for our area. Uses: culinary, medicinal, fragrance, dyes, cosmetics, many highly ornamental and attractive to butterflies and hummingbirds.

Thyme: (*Thymus* spp.) (P, TP) Native to Eurasia. Many variations; hybridization is common. Trailing to erect subshrubs. Uses: culinary, medicinal, fragrance, cosmetics, good for borders, groundcovers, attracting pollinators.

Winter Savory: (*Satureja montana*) (P) Native to southern Europe. Spicy, low-growing evergreen herb. Uses: culinary, medicinal, good for borders, rock gardens. The annual relative, Summer Savory, doesn’t stand up well to heat.

Because water is such a precious and fragile resource, it’s up to each of us to learn to do more with less. Make every drop count!

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