IN THIS CHAPTER

- Coming to terms with low-water realities
- Landscaping to conserve precious water
- Letting go of the traditional lawn
- Discovering suitable plants and savvy landscaping ideas

Chapter 1
Lacking Water? No Problem

This book is all about landscaping with less water. No matter whether you're trying to sustain an established yard in a desertlike climate or you're wishing to make changes while adjusting to a limited or unpredictable water supply, the message is the same: You can do it!

Having a beautiful landscape isn't just nice, it's also important. The plants in and around the area are more than décor, they're alive — even in times when water is scarce. We humans are bound in a relationship with them, not just for the pleasurable beauty or fragrance they may provide as we come and go from our home or hang out in the yard, and not just for the other creatures they help sustain (from pollinators to birds). We're also elementally bound together by the shared, interdependent, natural cycles of air — the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen — and water, the stuff of life as we know it.

When water is rationed or in short supply, when rain is a rare event, when we constantly hear dire stories about falling reservoirs and depleted aquifers, we worry. We should worry. Water is precious and vulnerable to human demands as well as forces that feel beyond our control, like weather patterns and macroclimate change.

And yet, having an attractive yard isn't a foolish wish, nor is it a luxury. Your yard is part of your home and part of the big picture of the larger landscape.

Rather than giving up, adapt. Become a good steward. This chapter gives you a brief overview of what you can do. Find out how to conserve water, how to better deliver it to wisely chosen plants, and how to keep it all healthy and beautiful.

Defining Low-Water Landscaping

Low-water landscaping is using less water, more efficiently.

Sustaining home landscaping on less water isn't mysterious. Many excellent techniques and ideas come from farming and agriculture. And of course research is continuing.

Certain water-conserving ideas from agriculture translate well to smaller and more intimate settings, whether you only have a courtyard or balcony, or you're trying to maintain a half-acre or more around your home. Also other gardeners have developed clever, effective ways to successfully nurture many plants with less water.

This book is here to help. I explore low-tech watering aids and ideas in Chapter 3 and delve into various irrigation systems you may wish to consider in Chapter 5.

REMEMBER

You don't need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. Plenty of trial and error and research, worldwide and over many centuries, has yielded innovative and practical ways to install and care for plants.

Here I begin by taking a closer look at where you can reduce water use and how. Not every suggestion will apply — but many will! Conserving is a matter of examining every opportunity.

Seeing where it makes sense to implement

There are many places and times where saving water can (and should) be possible. These include the following:

- Where getting water to your yard and plants is difficult or complex
- Where the water supply is expensive/where water bills just keep going up and up

- Where the water source is uncertain: unreliable, depleted, or drying up
- Where rainfall is unpredictable, sparse, or briefly seasonal
- Where water rationing is mandated and enforced
- Where the landscaping you do have is suffering from lack of water
- When you don't have time, funds, or the energy to fuss over your yard
- When you're ready for a change to more responsible and creative landscaping

Understanding why being water-wise is important

Global climate-change weather models suggest that severe droughts may not be occasional anomalies to endure but become the norm — sobering news. Therefore confronting the situation and being proactive about your water use is imperative.

REMEMBER

Should things improve or monsoon rains be generous, well, the good habits and practices you develop ought to stay in place anyway. Wasting water is a careless habit; conserving water shows respect for life itself, starting with the plants and creatures inhabiting your yard and also respect for your neighbors and neighborhood, your municipality, and your bioregion.

Leveraging your water sources

Part of water-wise gardening is gathering all the water you can and sometimes storing it to use with care later — in other words, maximizing your supply. You may be surprised by some of these useful ideas (check out Chapter 2 for starters):

- Start monitoring how much water your garden needs and uses.
- Install one or more rain barrels.
- Collect and store water in a cistern or tank.
- Use gray water. *Gray water* isn't all of your household water, but rather the sources of relatively clean consumption, such as sinks, showers, bathtubs, and even the washing machine (not the toilet or utility sink). Some municipalities regulate the use of gray water and, of course, you don't want to use certain soaps or cleaning agents, which would make the re-used water unsafe or unsuitable for your plants or soil.
- Route or reroute drainage from your roof. Study and route or reroute drainage out in your yard (see Chapter 16).

- Put in a *rain garden,* a garden area set up in a low area where rain pools or where you can divert your rain gutters (details in Chapter 16).
- Find out whether your municipality has *reclaimed* water, which is water that has been treated but isn't meant for drinking/not potable. They may be using it to irrigate city parks and other public places, but it may also be possible to access it for your personal landscape.

Eliminating wasteful watering practices

A series of seemingly minor changes in your watering habits can help. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Prevent runoff.** Don't overwater, don't water too long, and help water soak in so plants can use it. It begins with good soil, actually; read and heed Chapters 4 and 16.
- **Create watering basins around individual plants.** Chapter 3 explains how to make one, with a helpful illustration.
- **Create water-need zones by grouping plants with similar needs together so you can water them together.** More in Chapters 3 and 10.
- **Water when chance of evaporation is lowest.** A full explanation and discussion — including myth-busting — is in Chapter 3.
- **Hold water in the ground around your plants by mulching.** It's cheap, it's easy, and it's tremendously effective. Consult Chapter 15.

  
  REMEMBER

  Just to get on the Mulch Soapbox for a moment: Anyone can mulch their plants and everyone, especially those needing to conserve water, should! Mulch has profound benefits. Mulch prevents evaporation, which is huge because most plant roots are fairly close to the soil surface. Mulched plants need water less frequently and stay fresh-looking longer after a watering. Mulch also helps keep weeds at bay, and weeds are notorious for stealing water and nutrients from your desired plants.
- **Choose watering gear wisely.** Replace old-model sprinklers and sprinkler systems with some amazingly efficient new technology. A wide range of items and networks deliver water directly to the roots of your plants (and not to the sidewalk and gutter!). Review your options in Chapters 3 and 5.

TIP

Like to grow and display plants in containers, but you've definitely noticed that they're more water-intensive than plants in the ground? Good news: You can get the needed water to potted plants without waste or worry. Among the options are clever self-watering pots and water-holding crystals added to potting soil. See Chapters 15 and 17 for more details.

Replacing Impractical Plants with Practical Ones

If you're honest with yourself, you already know that your yard — including but not limited to your lawn — has some plants that aren't doing so well these days. Not enough water is obviously their problem. They're getting to be too much trouble and expense to maintain.

To be blunt, the solution is obvious. Out with the old, in with the new! I want to reassure you that not only can you make changes, but you can also embrace changes by making smart and creative choices that will look great. Keep reading for some general suggestions.

Getting rid of your lawn

Taking out your grass feels like the end of an era . . . because it's the end of an era. Green lawns suck up a lot of resources, mainly water but also fertilizer and perhaps weedkillers (all of which can be harmful to wildlife, your environs, and groundwater) — not to mention all your own effort and sweat in mowing and clipping. And what's the point if water is limited and no matter how hard you try, it doesn't look as lush as you want?

Completely removing your lawn isn't as hard as you might think. Lawn grass isn't deep-rooted, and you can dig it up and peel it away like a thick old carpet. You can also get rid of a lawn by tarping, solarizing the area, or undertaking sheet or "lasagna" mulching. Chapter 11 provides full instructions, details, and tips.

REMEMBER

After the deed is done and you've removed your grass, you'll have a clean slate, an area of open space, presumably in full sun and in full view of you and your neighbors. This is a brand-new landscaping opportunity! Yes, look at this transition as pivoting to a new and better way — because it is.

WARNING

While you're contemplating your next steps, don't leave bare, exposed ground. Weeds — those hardiest and most resilient of all plants, even in dire drought conditions — will invade. The saying "Nature abhors a vacuum" is never truer than when a spot is freshly cleared. Just cover over the area until you're ready to re-landscape and replant (see Chapter 11 for a rundown of effective temporary barriers).

Considering lawn alternatives

You have a lot of options for alternatives, depending on the size of the space, your budget, and your energy. I recommend not only that you study the more in-depth discussion in Chapter 12, but also do a little (fun and inspiring) research by looking at how others in your neighborhood and region have dealt with lawn replacement.

Meanwhile, the following can jump-start your thinking:

- **Put in a native drought-tolerant grass or grass blend.** True, your lawn won't look like a golf green, but it may serve as a pretty and quite water-wise new installation. A plus: These types of grasses look more harmonious and natural, rather than out of place.
- **Consider ornamental grasses.** Unlike turf grasses, ornamental grasses are clump-formers, so they tend to be taller and need to be planted more closely if you're still wanting broad coverage. You can clip or mow to maintain a desired height.
- **Install a meadow.** Full disclosure — installing a meadow takes soil preparation, careful selection of a balance of flowering plants and native grasses, and some regular maintenance to keep it looking nice. It's gardening; you can't just sprinkle a can of meadow mix and be done. However, the results can be gorgeous and gratifying, and the area definitely will consume very little water once established.

  

  WARNING

  Some municipalities and homeowner associations are still reluctant to allow or approve of meadow gardens, particularly in front yards or areas clearly visible from the street.
- **Put in a groundcover.** Plenty of plants certainly can fill in and cover up a broad area and look terrific. Some introduce different shades of green and other colors (and/or seasonal color changes, which can be lovely) to your home landscape. Chapter 7 has an annotated list of carpeters to consider.

THINK OUTSIDE THE GRASS BOX

Other ideas for an area once devoted to a lawn go beyond what you may have originally imagined. What about these solutions?

- **Lay down a base of gravel and rocks.** But do it right. Make sure water can get through and weeds are minimized. Explore different colors, sizes, and textures. Place larger rocks so they look natural and perhaps also serve a practical purpose, such as sheltering small plants vulnerable to wind. Chapter 14 can give you the ideas and information you need to proceed, including attractive planting suggestions.
- **Put in a terrace, patio, or deck.** In the case of a terrace or patio, instead of a slab, explore the new permeable options that allow you to tuck in low-growers like creeping thyme between pavers and also help filter water through your landscape rather than letting it run off. Check out Chapter 16.
- **Take a fresh look at artificial turf.** Don't scoff — cruddy ole Astroturf is a thing of the past. Artificial turf has experienced a major boom in recent years, thanks to new materials, technologies, options, and installation savvy. Consult Chapter 13 for more details. Such a lawn won't use water at all, except perhaps for an occasional rinse-off!

TIP

Don't be succulents-averse. There are more options than you may realize, and mixing and matching can also supply impressive, beautiful, and effective coverage.

Checking Out Suitable Ornamental Plants

A brave new world of exciting ornamental plants (grown for beauty and decoration) is available for low-water settings. In fact, never before in the history of gardening has there been such a broad selection of appropriate choices! The chapters in Part 2 are full of descriptive lists of water-wise plants. The lengths of the lists and the information, I hope, will be an eye-opener.

REMEMBER

Newly installed plants, of any kind, need and deserve a good start, especially ones billed as drought-tolerant. Once planted properly — see the guidance in Chapter 10 — they'll need extra water for at least their first year to help their root systems get established. After that, count on them to become much more self-sufficient.

Before looking at — and falling for — individual plants, get oriented. These sections describe the many different kinds and then delve into ways to tell if any given plant that catches your fancy will be a good choice for your low-water landscape.

Looking at the different types

The following are the general categories. Rest assured you can find many choices within each type that do well in low-water settings:

- **Perennials:** These plants bloom year after year, often increasing in size or spreading out. Many are flowering, and you can pick ones to have colorful gardens at different times of the growing year.
- **Annuals:** Although these plants live for only one growing season (hence the name), they deliver a lot of color and many are truly tough, standing up to heat and drought.
- **Succulents:** Sure, these are a dry-garden cliché, but let me reassure you that your choices are endless. Get away from the ordinary and have fun!
- **Shrubs:** Some bushes are good for hedges, some work well all on their own. Some have attractive needles or leaves, some change color with the seasons. Some flower and fruit. They always bring substance and heft to any home landscape.
- **Trees:** They provide shade and beauty. The trick is to select ones appropriate to your climate and of a size that works for your yard.
- **Vines:** Don't forget vines, which can grow quickly and drape over fences and other supports to add beauty of foliage and flower — at eye level or even higher. Some also produce fruit or attractive seedpods.

TIP

Ideally, you want some of everything in order to create a diverse home landscape. Variety keeps your yard interesting in all seasons.

Identifying appropriate plants

Any good plant nursery or garden center has a lot to offer, but you can't always be sure that everything is water-wise. Fortunately, recognizing the features of dryland plants isn't difficult when you start shopping around.

REMEMBER

Succulent leaves and stems are such an obvious sign of drought-tolerance that I'm not going to call them out in the following lists. These plants have evolved to hold water and use it as needed; they're supremely appropriate for low-water landscapes. In fact, many don't need any supplemental water after they're established in your yard. Hard to beat!

When shopping or viewing plants in any setting, check the leaves. Look for:

- **Waxy coating:** The covering helps seal in and conserve water. Although many plants have coated leaves, dryland ones have especially obvious coatings — you can tell by touching or running a finger across one (sometimes a bit of the whitish powdery coating will come off on your finger).
- **Leathery texture:** Tough and/or thicker leaves are a sign that the plant isn't holding a lot of water, but neither does it have as much to lose.
- **Silver or gray color:** Lighter-colored leaves protect themselves and their plant from intense hot sun by reflecting back the light rather than absorbing it.
- **A coating of fuzz:** This is actually made up of many tiny, short hairs, which serve to slow water loss. The hairs also help to shield the leaf from direct sunlight.
- **Narrow and small leaves:** Plants transpire water through tiny openings in their leaves called *stomata.* Narrow and small leaves have less real estate available for stomata. Less stomata means less water loss!

Also check the stems. Look for:

- **Compact growth:** Watch for leaves that are held close to the stem, parallel or at a narrow angle (rather than splayed outward like an open hand). They still get necessary sunlight but are less vulnerable to drying out quickly.
- **Fuzz:** Like the fuzz that covers some leaf surfaces (see the previous bulleted list), these tiny hairs put the brakes on water loss and also shelter the stem surface from direct, drying sunlight.
- **Spines:** You may have heard that spines discourage animals from eating plants that bear them, and that's true, but they do more: Like the tiny hairs of fuzz, they reduce water loss and offer a little shade. (In the case of cacti, water may condense on the spines and eventually trickle down the ground, hopefully offering a bit of moisture to the plant's root system.)

COMPARING NATIVES VERSUS NONNATIVES

You may think that gardening with native plants results in a yard that looks a lot like an unkempt local or regional wild, natural area. What's the point, you ask? Don't people want their home landscapes to be more beautiful? Don't many gardeners want their yards to stand out? And don't they also want them to reflect their own taste as well as their wishes for enclosure and sanctuary?

There's no doubt that growing native plants makes practical sense. Native plants are well-adapted to local climate, weather patterns, and soils. They're naturally tough and thus allow a low-maintenance landscape. They're accustomed to getting by on low water and staying alive.

The chapters in Part 2 offer specifics. Here are some general guidelines:

- **If your concern is that native plants are too rangy, sprawling, casual, or sloppy, fret not!** Many savvy gardeners and horticulturists have been sorting through the many different species for quite some time and have spent their attention on the best ones, the ones that are suitable for home gardens — focusing on manageable size, tidy growth habit, best/prettiest foliage and flowers, longest bloom time, and so on. A lot of work has been done and continues to be done. The native plants offered for sale at local and regional nurseries and area plant sales meet these standards.
- **You can have it all — tough and beautiful native plants.** Another ongoing process is the improvement of native plants. Occasionally a rogue or random yellow-flowered plant will produce some irresistible red flowers (for example, coreopsis), someone will notice and take a cutting and, before too long, the red-flowered one is on offer. Horticulturists also have fiddled with and selected for longer bloom times, larger and more flowers, and smaller-size plants, which show up for sale as *cultivars* (cultivated varieties) or *nativars* (specifically, cultivated varieties of native plants).
- **Are nonnative low-water plants less preferable?** Some believe gardeners should stick to growing native plants because they best support local ecosystems, including beleaguered native butterflies, pollinators, and birds. That's an assumption. Low-water plants from other parts of the world (such as Mexico, Australia, the Mediterranean, and South Africa) make attractive garden plants and often the local insect and wildlife population adapts. Research is ongoing. ***Conclusion:*** There's nothing wrong with planting some natives and some nonnatives.
- **What if you want to support your local ecosystem?** I recommend approaching this concern on a case-by-case basis, or rather plant-by-plant. Research each plant you choose, no matter the origins; a good nursery staffer ought to be able to reassure you both on a plant's qualities and habits and on its benefits to native creatures . . . or point you to alternatives.

Exploring Beauty and Color Tricks

"But I don't like desert-dot landscaping," you say? Take heart. You can avoid clichés in many ways and have a great-looking yard that uses minimal water. These sections give you an overview.

Building up your yard from the ground up

When redoing a yard or an area, you can tackle two projects first and foremost. These aren't really beauty tricks, but the results can be dramatic enough that you and your neighbors might think so! Either or both of the following will result in a major boost for whatever you install next (healthy, happy plants lead to a gorgeous home landscape, it's as simple as that!):

- **Install an in-ground irrigation system.** This project tends to involve a lot of digging and disruption, so plant when you're done. Consult Chapter 5 to get a handle on what's involved.
- **Improve the soil.** If plants and landscaping projects have struggled or failed in your yard in the past, it may be high time to stop and start over.

  Dig out and replace terrible or depleted soil, or at least improve what you have by adding organic matter (turn to Chapter 4 for details). This could be a game-changing step on your way to a successful new landscape, one that uses less water (because the improved soil holds moisture so much better) and is beautiful (because the plants are thriving). Consider it before you do anything else!

Exploring dry-design ideas

Look, really look, at what others have done. Begin right now by turning to the color insert in the center of this book and flipping through the images.

Then, next time you're online or on Instagram or Pinterest, run some searches and feast your eyes. Also take the time to go into a bookstore, the shop attached to a botanic garden, or even just the racks at your local home-and-landscape center, stand there and browse colorful books and magazines — buy a few, bring them home, and study the many good ideas.

This sort of exploration is necessary, nourishing, fun — and inspirational!

HOW TO GET A LUSH LOOK

To get an appealing, filled-in, lush look with low-water plants, choose plants with care. Start by cruising through the long lists in Part 2. Here are a couple general suggestions:

- **Aim for a balance of colors.** You want variety, but not a total mishmash. Do this by choosing and emphasizing colors you like and are compatible with each other. Different shades of green foliage can tie it all together.
- **Plant plenty!** You want to cover open ground without crowding. Intermixing makes all the difference — surround a small tree or shrub with flowers (see the photo in the color insert for a great example) or have an ornamental grass arise from a carpet of groundcovering sedums.

WARNING

Beware the fool's paradise of an "instant landscape." This is when a bunch of larger plants are brought in and planted close together to give a mature and finished look. The satisfaction and pleasure don't last. It won't be long until the plants start crowding each other, or some start to dominate and overrun the others. The health and good looks of all of them start to falter. You'll end up having to prune often and/or take out some plants — a lot of extra work and expense, most unfortunate.

Borrowing ideas from nature

The natural world is the original testing ground for what survives and what thrives, no matter what your soil and climate challenges. Here's a sampling of that wisdom that you can use in your own yard (Chapter 10 has much more information):

- **Capitalize on microclimates in your yard.** A *microclimate* is a hyper-local situation, differing somewhat from its immediate surroundings. The shelter of a large rock, wall, or courtyard offers you the chance to grow plants that need extra protection, either because they dry out faster or get damaged or toppled on windy days. You can make little nooks or vignettes in such spots.
- **Leverage strength in numbers.** Plants grown in close proximity can not only present an attractive composition but can also help protect one another from everything from being stepped or nibbled on to collectively raising the local humidity for mutual benefit. Check out Chapter 3 for additional details.

- **Have color going on at all times.** Flowering plants cycle in and out of bloom. You can maximize color by choosing plants that bloom over a long period, but planning for changes is fun and gratifying. Study the lists in Part 2 and make wish lists according to colors and seasons.

  Don't forget foliage color! Succulents, in particular, offer a wonderful array of colors, everything from rosy red to sage green to powdery blue to burnished gold. Check on leaf colors for ornamental grasses as well as for some perennials and shrubs. Some plants have *variegated* leaves (leaves of more than one color); others change hues with the seasons.

TIP

- **Play with texture.** Nature abounds in variety, and that's absolutely true when it comes to the leaf and plant textures of low-water plants — shiny, smooth, rough, fluffy, brushy, quilted, spiky, and so on. When you fill your landscape with a range of textures, the eye travels, delighted and intrigued.