

Below are a few of the questions from The Water Smart Pipeline, a hotline for low water gardening questions. The Water Smart Pipeline is a project of the Water Conservation Garden and sponsored by a grant from the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust.

Pipeline hours are Tuesdays 8:30 to noon and Thursdays 1 pm to 4:30 pm. Call 866 962-7021.

The Pipeline is answered by garden expert, garden journalist, and designer Nan Sterman, author of *California Gardener's Guide Volume II*.

**Its summer and the living is easy. I want to work on my garden. What plants should I buy?**

Summer is a great time of year to plan, but *not* a good time of year to plant.

Planting in the hot months is a huge challenge for drought tolerant plants. In the hot, dry air, plants lose lots of water from their leaves into the atmosphere. Their roots aren't yet established so they can't replace the lost water fast enough to keep up.

You can try irrigating, but it is a huge challenge to balance enough water to keep them going, but not so much that they drown.

The result is often wilted leaves and dried out roots. And, plants that go through that kind of stress may not live very long.

**What is the best time of year to plant drought tolerant plants?**

Fall and winter are the *best* planting times unless you live in Julian or another location where winter is often below freezing. Spring is second best.

In fall and winter, the soil stays warm enough for roots to become established while the air is cool enough that plants aren't stressed by the heat.

*And*, once rains begin, you can let Mother Nature manage the irrigation.

So, rather than purchase plants now, take this time to research the plants that will work best for your situation.

Prepare your garden beds, update your irrigation system, install walkways, repair decks, and do everything necessary to be prepared for fall planting.

If you really need to get your hands in the dirt, focus your gardening activities on your summer vegetable garden.

**I tried planting drought tolerant plants but they all died. What happened?**

Did you water the plants regularly after you planted them?

All plants, drought tolerant or not, need regular, deep water for their first year or two in the ground in order to establish deep, healthy, resistant root systems.

Keep plant roots moist but not wet during that establishment period. Then, cut back on how *often* you water, watering for the same number of minutes every time you irrigate.

And don't forget to mulch!

### **What is mulch?**

Mulch is a thick layer of “stuff” that you spread over the soil to

- Hold in the moisture
- Help keep the temperature of the soil even
- Keep weeds down
- Improve the soil texture
- Encourage beneficial microbes in the soil that interact with your plants and keep them healthy

Mulch can be made from plant waste that is shredded, and/or aged or composted. Or you can use a layer of gravel, decomposed granite, even marbles or recycled glass. Succulents prefer these “inorganic” mulches while most other plants prefer “organic” mulch.

### **How do I mulch?**

The ideal is a 3” thick layer of mulch applied to the entire soil surface.

As you spread mulch, be sure that it does not touch any plant parts. Leave three to six inches of ground bare around the base of each plant. If a plant's branches or leaves grow over the mulch and touch it, that's fine, but don't let the mulch touch stems, branches, or trunks.

Mulch breaks down over time. Reapply every six to twelve months.

DO NOT apply weed cloth or plastic beneath the mulch, especially if you are using mulch made from plant materials. The idea is for the mulch to break down and become incorporated into the soil. Weed barrier and plastic prevent that from happening. They also make it hard for water to penetrate down into the soil.

**I keep seeing that we need to go to low water plants but they look so brown and dry. Aren't there any pretty low water plants?**

There are tons of beautiful low water plants and several places to see them. The Water Conservation Garden ([www.TheGarden.org](http://www.TheGarden.org)) at Cuyamaca College in El Cajon has extensive, beautiful low water demonstration gardens that are full of color.

While it can be a challenge to envision how a plant will look when you are seeing it in the nursery can, at The Garden, you can see how those plants actually look in the ground, in a garden setting.

Another excellent example is the San Diego County Water Authority Building ([www.sdcwa.org](http://www.sdcwa.org)) in Kearny Mesa. This beautiful garden was designed by Pamela Homfelt and includes both succulent and non-succulent plants.

Quail Botanical Gardens in Encinitas ([www.qbgardens.org](http://www.qbgardens.org)) also has displays of low water plants, California natives along with plants from Australia, South Africa, and other Mediterranean climate regions of the world.