

# Gardening for the Environment

By Sandra Gray, Fort Bend Master Gardener

## Saving Water

Did you know there are things you can do to save water? Each of these suggestions will help save that precious resource (and if you save money, we know you will use it wisely). The Department of Energy has tips on how to save water with landscaping you may want to [visit](#). The [Best Management Practices](#) from Texas A&M University's Water University can also help.



*Water wisely and save money*

- Using mulch is estimated to save 20% or more of the water a garden might need. It also helps protect the plant roots from extreme heat in the summer and freezing in the winter. Organic mulches will decay over time adding organic materials to the soil. Learn more about [mulching from Dr. William M. Johnson](#).
- Water your lawn wisely! Over-watering is a common gardening mistake and can cause plant disease. Learn more about [effective watering](#).
- Choose your plants wisely. Some plants are water guzzlers. Why choose one of those when there are so many lovely plants that can thrive on less? Most retailers will identify how much water a plant needs but you must make sure to check before you buy. If you get a plant elsewhere (perhaps a gift?) you can check online resources to determine its water requirements. If you really want a plant with higher water needs, consider planting it in a boggy part of your garden.
- Put plants with similar watering needs together in your garden. Then, you can water each garden according to the needs of those plants rather than wasting water on the cacti in your lily garden.
- Turn off automated systems when watering is not needed. Better yet, invest in a rain or moisture sensor for your irrigation system so it will automatically detect when it is not needed.
- Routinely check your automated irrigation for broken heads and leaks. A simple monthly check could save enough money to take yourself out for ice cream. While you are doing so, also check to make sure you are not watering the street, driveway, or sidewalk. They won't grow no matter how much you water them!
- [Reduce the size of your lawn](#). It is estimated that 30 – 60% of urban fresh water is used on lawns. Reduce your lawn with garden beds that contain native plants with low water needs. Native plants are acclimated to your climate and will frequently require less water.
- In the summer, raise your mowing height. The extra height will help protect the roots from the sun and, consequently, reduce the lawn's water needs.
- Water your plants before 10am or after 6pm. When you water during the hottest part of the day, much of the water is lost to evaporation. Avoid that by irrigating at these more optimal times.

- Use rainwater harvesting, such as a rain barrel, to collect rainwater runoff. Learn [how to make a rain barrel](#).
  - Prepare for drought by using these [Earth-Kind® Drought Preparedness recommendations](#).
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## Saving Electricity

Planting wisely can help reduce your electrical bill, perhaps as much as 20% (and if you save by following these tips, you are welcome). The Department of Energy has many [suggestions about](#) the benefits landscaping can provide to your energy usage.



- Plant a tree in the right place. A deciduous tree can shade your house in the summer while allowing the sun to warm your home in the winter. The Arbor Day Foundation explains how to [plant a tree to save energy in the summer](#). You can also plant evergreens, such as conifers, to help provide winter warmth. The Arbor Day Foundation also explains [how to do that](#).
  - Protect your air-conditioning unit from the sun. Your air-conditioning unit will run more efficiently if it is cooler. If it is not already shaded by a tree, planting shrubs or vines around the unit can provide that needed shade. Just make sure the plants are several feet away from the unit to allow good air flow.
  - Trim shrubs and tree branches away from your windows. By allowing natural light to enter your home, you will need less electricity to light the interior of your home.
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## Reducing Chemical Use

The overuse of chemical herbicides and pesticides is linked to many problems.

- Chemical runoff can infiltrate and pollute surface water.
- The more chemicals you use, the greater your potential exposure to possibly toxic chemicals.
- While pesticides may kill bad bugs, they also kill good bugs, such as bees, lady beetles, praying mantises, and others.
- Chemicals become part of the food chain and harms birds and other animals.
- Chemicals are linked to increased air pollution.
- When pollinators are destroyed, plants don't get pollinated affecting our food production.



**Toxic**

These and many other reasons should motivate you to reduce your chemical use. So, what are your alternatives? That depends on what you are trying to do. Here are some ideas.

- To reduce your pesticide use, learn about IPM ([Integrated Pest Management](#)). This program uses a variety of techniques to reduce pests while making your home and landscape strong enough to withstand some pests.
- To reduce your herbicide use, make sure to mulch your garden beds and learn about IWM ([Integrated Weed Management for Lawns](#)). This program uses weed prevention, spot treating, mechanical measures (hand removal), and a variety of other methods to make your lawn the showcase of the neighborhood.
- Finally, make sure that when you feel you must use chemicals, handle them safely. [This document](#) discusses safe usage, storage and disposal.