

5 Types of California Drought-Savvy Garden Designs

Introduction

Water-savvy gardening can lead to beautiful landscapes with excellent curb appeal. While drought conditions and water regulations vary year to year, it's always prudent to design for water efficiency. Because nearly 60% of a person's household water footprint can go toward lawn and garden maintenance, getting it right can seem daunting.¹ Through water-wise design, planning and tactics, Bay Area residents can maintain their homes' beautiful landscaping while pursuing water conservation goals.

In this guide, we will discuss five types of drought-savvy garden designs, the pros and cons of each, and related tactics for achieving an attractive landscape suited to your home and its water needs.



Cool Comfort Garden

The cool comfort design, characterized by strong shade and plants such as Sonoma Sage and Snow-in-Summer that thrive in moderate temperatures, provides an excellent ratio of plant to mulch for a lush, green aesthetic.² With appropriate hydrozoning, this style of garden can be designed to require relatively little maintenance.

Hydrozoning is a strategy that involves grouping plants together according to their water needs, which can drive numerous benefits. Although setting up these zones can make things significantly easier, it's important to remember individual plants' specialized water needs. Shrubs and trees, for instance, can need as little as one-third as much water as lawn grass, but adjusting volume alone isn't enough, since they benefit from less frequent but deep sprinkling.³ Be sure to do your homework on each of the plants in your garden before committing to planting.

Hydrozoning Benefits

- Watering one's garden becomes much easier
- Water-efficiency increases
- Thirsty and low-maintenance plants alike can be tended via automated zone-specific systems⁴



² <http://www.sanjose.watersavingplants.com/GWImage.php?index=1&source=gt&page=1>

³ <http://www.sanjose.watersavingplants.com/Garden-Resources/tips.php>

⁴ https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/sjwater/files/documents/water_wisely_06242009.pdf

Patio Garden

Characterized by more space for lawn and mulch among a mix of trees and shrubs to provide a natural feel that doesn't crowd walkways, the Patio Garden design provides its own unique challenges and benefits. This kind of design is ideal for those who love to host friends and family, providing an attractive outdoor space that serves as an extension of their living room — or their dining room, if the space includes room for a table. With spaced-out layouts like this, filling in the gaps with organic mulch can help ensure that sprinkler water that falls between planted areas doesn't go to waste.⁵ Organic mulches include compost, grass clippings, straw, aged animal manure, pine needles, leaves, bark and wood chips.



Benefits of Organic Mulches

- Improved water absorption
- Added nutrients in the soil as mulch breaks down
- Soil insulation during the winter
- Soil cooling in the summer
- Soil compaction prevention
- Soil erosion prevention
- Suppression of weed growth⁶



Types of Inorganic Mulches

- Rock
- Gravel
- Sheeting

Arid Garden

The arid garden design is ideal for households in hot climates that have especially tight water restrictions, since it employs low-maintenance plants such as Prickly Pears and Golden Barrel Cacti. This design provides a Southwest feel, utilizing inorganic mulch to fill the space between plant groupings.⁷

The benefits of inorganic mulches that help provide the classic rugged desert look of this type of garden go beyond aesthetics. Inorganic mulches can also improve drainage and weed suppression and lessen erosion. However, inorganic mulches can also absorb and hold the sun's heat, which can actually increase the amount of water surrounding plants need. As a result, inorganic mulches are best used in conjunction with plants with limited water needs and high drainage requirements.⁸



Avoid Overspray

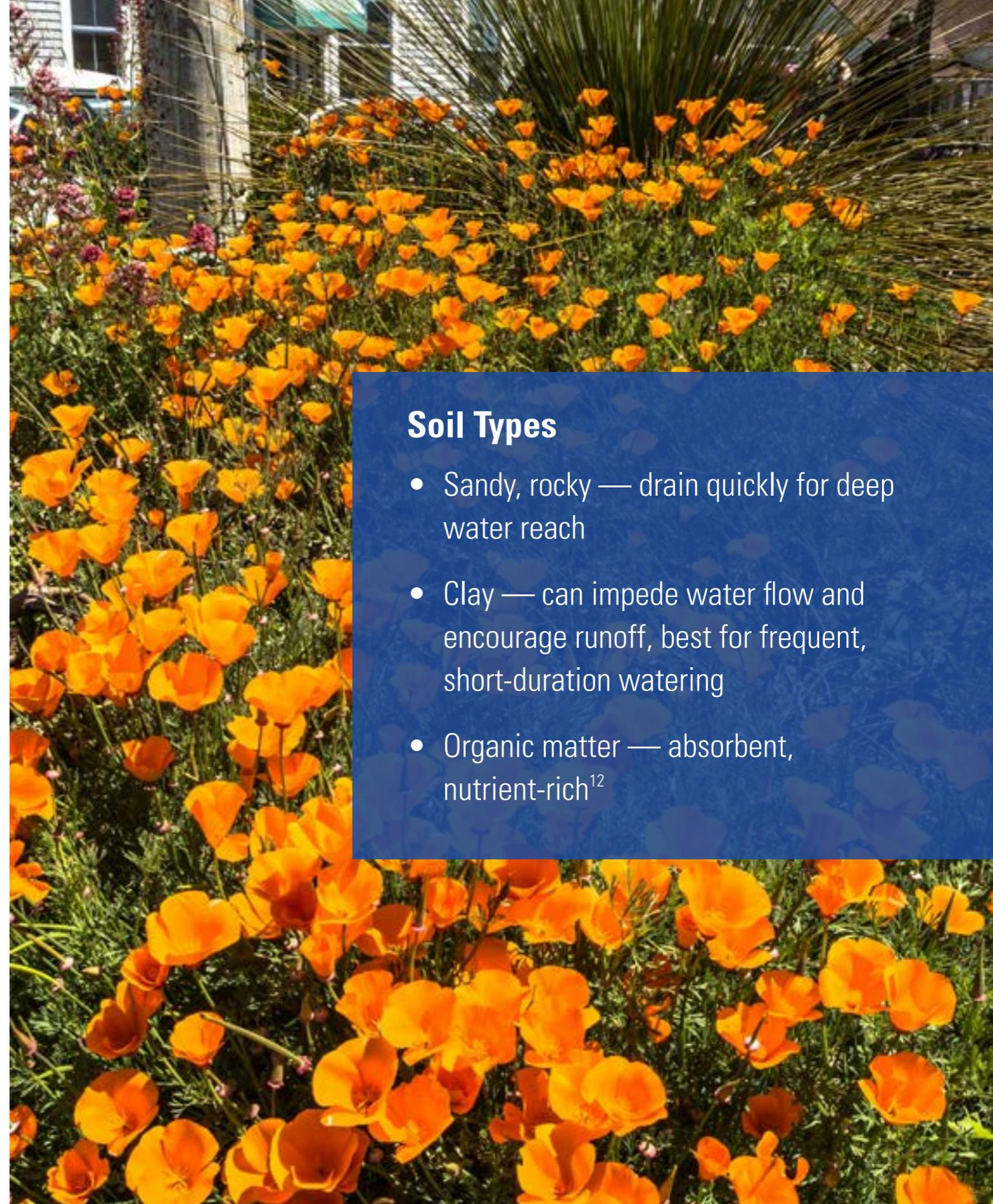
Don't waste water sprinkling your walkways. Set a routine for yourself to regularly watch your sprinklers in action to make sure they aren't overspraying, sending water intended for plants uselessly onto the concrete.¹⁰

Shade Garden Serenity

If your garden area is already home to shade trees, you have a unique opportunity to plant a relatively low-maintenance lush, green garden made up of beautiful, low-growing plants such as Maiden's Wreath and Dalmatian Bellflower, both of which thrive in the shade and require little water, even in summer. Coast Live Oaks and Japanese Maples generate plenty of shade and are ideal for a water-conscious garden. The Coast Live Oak is known for being particularly drought-resistant, while the Japanese Maple is susceptible to hot winds. As a result, consider mixing Japanese Maple in with larger, wind-breaking trees or locating them on a less wind-exposed side of your home to help them survive and thrive.⁹

Golden Garden

Gardeners looking to create an eye-catching effect by using bright colors to pop against luscious greens while still using plants well-suited to their current climate may want to consider the Golden Garden model. This design relies on plants native to California, so less environmental fine-tuning is required to help them succeed. Bright, water-efficient flowers such as Golden and White poppies and Julia Phelps California Lilacs can really broaden your garden's palette while aiding water conservation. Just be sure to choose an area that gets a lot of sunlight, and use a well-drained soil to help prevent overwatering, which can be a real danger for these plants.¹¹



Soil Types

- Sandy, rocky — drain quickly for deep water reach
- Clay — can impede water flow and encourage runoff, best for frequent, short-duration watering
- Organic matter — absorbent, nutrient-rich¹²

¹¹ <http://www.sanjose.watersavingplants.com/GWImage.php?index=3&source=gt&page=1>

¹² https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/sjwater/files/documents/water_wisely_06242009.pdf



For More Information

To learn more about how garden design factors into water conservation, check out San Jose Water Company's [water conservation page](#).