

PLANNING A LOW WATER GARDEN IN THE ACT

Low water or no-added-water gardening begins with three basics.



The first of these is ***soil preparation***. Improving the soil already present in your garden is recommended rather than merely applying a layer of topsoil to your land. Improvement is necessary to make the soil friable so that any water that does fall will penetrate and reach the roots of the plants rather than be lost by run-off. Compacted soil should be mechanically ripped or turned over by a fork and organic material such as compost or manure dug in to a spade's depth. Clay soils will be helped by adding gypsum at the rate of 500g to the square metre. If additional soil is needed it should be thoroughly incorporated into the natural soil of the block.

The second basic is making an ***appropriate choice of plants*** to utilise those suitable for our dry climate. Here, many Australian native plants have a natural advantage, as they are genetically predisposed to low water conditions once they have been established. By planting our unique and beautiful flora we can save water.

There is a native plant to suit nearly every situation. Plants indigenous to our local region are especially useful as they are able to cope with heavy frosts through the winter yet also tolerate high summer temperatures. Plant selection should be based on the ability of particular plants to adapt to your garden or rural block environment as well as the effect you are trying to achieve, including size, colour and texture.

The correct choice of plants will ensure that a garden or rural holding is enhanced without the necessity for huge quantities of additional water after the establishment stage. Suitable trees, shrubs, rockery plants, ground covers and grassland species are listed overleaf.

The third basic is ***mulching*** to retain any precious moisture that does penetrate the soil. Mulches come in many varied forms: Eucamulch, bark chips, wood chips, leaf litter, pebbles, aggregate, sand, shredded prunings, straw, lucerne hay and others.

Using mulch, which breaks down over a period of time, has the advantage of adding organic matter and attracting earthworms to improve both the structure and nutrient level of the soil. However, it is important to keep the mulch about 40 mm away from the stems and trunks of plants and shrubs so as to avoid collar rot diseases.

The depth of mulch varies depending on the texture of the mulch. Generally something between 30mm for fine mulch and 60-80mm for coarse mulch will allow moisture to penetrate and not be totally absorbed by the mulch, yet be thick enough to help the soil retain the moisture and prevent evaporation.

Having mastered the basics the next step is to



take a hard look at the lawn.

On average, Over 50% of water used at home is outside on the garden and up to 80% of this is on lawns. While the classical green lawn may have a cool and lush appearance and can absorb significant foot traffic, it demands resources, especially water and fertilisers that are needed in large amounts for a healthy sward. ***Reduce the area of lawn and you reduce the need for water.*** There are options, which require little or no fertiliser or extra water, and no lawn mower.

One is to use mulches. Mulches can cover areas without having any plants, or they can combine with plants. Some mulches such as pine flakes or



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gravel can be used to form natural pathways. Mulches are usually very effective in reducing water loss from soil and suppressing weed growth.

For some people in Canberra the ultimate replacement of lawn could be something approaching the lowland native grasslands, which were present before European settlement. This native grassland garden could include local native tussock grasses such as *Themeda*, *Danthonia*, *Poa* and *Microlaena* species.

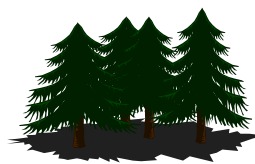
These grasses can be readily established in mulch such as stable manure, provided invasive exotic grasses such as couch have been removed first. A range of smaller herbs and shrubs could then be introduced between grass tussocks, or even a few terrestrial orchids. One or two eucalypts may be planted into the grassland and bordered by larger native shrubs.

These can be chosen from the following list, with emphasis again on local species (☼) which should not need much supplementary water. Many other interesting and attractive species may also be used. The list indicates plant height in metres.

Shrubs and trees

Acacia acinacea	1.5
A.boormanii	3-4
A.buxifolia (☼)	1.2
A.pravissima(☼)	4-6
A.pycnantha (☼)	7
A.rubida (☼)	4
Allocasuarina littoralis (☼)	5-9
Banksia ericifolia	3-5
B.serrata	8-10
B.spinulosa	0.5-3
Callistemon “Endeavour”	3
C.phoeniceus	3
Callitris endlicheri (☼)	5
Eriostemon myoporoides	1.5-3
Eucalyptus mannifera (☼)	8-14
E.moorei	7
E.rossii (☼)	15-20
Grevillea arenaria	1
G.lanigera (☼)	1
Kunzea parvifolia (☼)	1.5

Melaleuca armillaris	5
M.incana	2-3
Westringia “Wynyabbie Gem”	1.5-2



Smaller Garden and Rockery Plants

Brachycome ciliaris	B.multifida
Bracteantha bracteata	B.viscosa (☼)
Bossiaea prostrata (☼)	
Chrysocephalum apiculatum (☼)	
Correa ‘Dusky Bells’	Correa reflexa (☼)
Crowea exalata (☼)	C.’festival’
Dianella revoluta (☼)	
Grevillea ‘Bronze Rambler’	
Hardenbergia violacea (☼)	
Hibbertia obtusifolia (☼)	
Hibbertia pedunculata (☼)	
Lomandra longifolia (☼)	
Micromyrtus ciliata	
Patersonia sericea	
Stylidium graminifolium (☼)	
Wahlenbergia communis (☼)	
W.stricta (☼)	

Grasses

Bothriochloa species (☼)
Chionochloa pallida(☼)
Poa labillardieri (☼)
Poa sieberiana (☼)
Stipa elegantissima (☼)
Themeda triandra (☼)



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