



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

## Reducing Your Trips to the Well (or Water Tap)

Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.

—"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Not to be overly dramatic about the ongoing lack of rainfall in the hill country, but the verse above fits our situation too well. Even when rainfall is normal, less than 3 percent of the water on Earth is fresh. The other 97 percent is ocean water, which neither people nor plants can drink.



*Drought-resistant Mexican Mint Marigold (Tagetes lucida) blooms profusely in the fall.*

If you are wondering what you can do to keep your plants alive as summer continues and communities ration precious supplies, check out the home page of the Hill Country Master Gardeners.

Here you will find several tips about sprinklers, and one particularly easy conservation idea: Use the water that drains from your AC unit on your plants and grass. You can attach a hose to the drip faucet or simply collect the water in a container and transfer it to your plants. Also, think of other sources of reusable water, like the dirty water in the dog's water bowl, or the water you use to rinse dishes.

Here are other simple conservation ideas:

- If your lawn is already established, think smaller. Doug Welsh, in his *Texas Garden Almanac*, suggests that homeowners tired of caring for a big lawn should adopt a goal of removing 200 square feet of grass annually. "Look for areas that are not used for recreation or other functions," he adds. "Increase landscape quality by replacing with groundcovers, shrub plantings, decks or patios, or vegetable gardens."
- Before you replace grass with those groundcovers mentioned above, make a list of plants that keep their beauty despite drought and heat. You can see almost 40 of these plants in a demonstration garden created and maintained by Hill Country Master Gardeners at the Kerr County Extension Office at 3655 Highway 27. The garden is open 9 to noon and 1 to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.
- If you are establishing a lawn, consider grasses that require the least amount of water. The demonstration garden includes five plots of grass for homeowners to evaluate, including St. Augustine, Bermuda, Zoysia and Buffalo.
- Forgo daily light sprinklings of your plants and water 5 to 6 inches deep once a week. It's called tough love, and it works on tough plants.
- Mulch. Think of this as putting a sun block on your plants' roots. Mulch helps the soil preserve moisture, reduces disease problems, blocks out weeds and just looks good. Use hay, straw, leaves, grass clippings or compost, 4 to 6 inches deep. Check it regularly and replace it often, once a year at least.
- When you do open the water tap, do it before the sun rises, when neither the wind nor the temperature is high.

Let this short list spark your gardener's creativity. What can else can you think of to reduce your trips to the well?

Visit the Hill Country Master Gardeners Demonstration Garden online for a list of drought-resistant plants.



*Jerusalem Sage (Phlomis fruticosa) looks good when it's hot and dry.*