

Beautiful Gardens That Face Up to the Big Thirst

By Katherine Grace Endicott

Even in the best of times a gardener is faced with failures and frustrations. Just when the roses are in full bloom, the deer jump over the fence and eat them. Finally the strawberries are about to ripen to perfection, and mildew invades the garden. A perpetual challenge to Northern California gardeners is the Big Thirst, which may begin as early as May and last into October.

Four to six rainless months are normal. Abnormal is when the rain is scant during the rest of the year. This cycle, both normal and abnormal, has been going on for thousands of years. What is new is us.

For the past 100 years or so we have insisted on gardening in California as if water were unlimited. Unfortunately, in the worst of times, our water is rationed. As our population increases, our water may be limited even in the best of times.

Because Mother Nature won't oblige us by changing, obviously, we gardeners are going to have to change our ways. That we can change and create stunning gardens at the same time is proved the award-winning work of **Kathryn Mathewson**, a San Francisco landscape designer, and her Secret Gardens design-build firm.

For the second year in a row, **Mathewson** won a Superior Award, the highest honor of the National Landscaping Association. Her design for the home of Victor and Evelyn Erickson in Los Altos won both the 1990 Superior Award of the NLA and the current 1991 Northern California Xeriscape Conference Residential Award.

This year she won the NLA Superior Award for her design for the Jean and Len Reilly family in Berkeley. The design for the Reilly home is up for xeriscaping honors to be announced in 1992.

Defies Stereotypes

The design defies the most common image of drought-tolerant gardens. Lush and complex, the garden for the Reilly home brings a strong sense of form to a natural woodland setting in the native oaks.

Mathewson believes in learning from our environment. Our aesthetic sensibilities should be taken from our environment as well our practical requirements. She believes we should be talking about beautiful drought-tolerant gardens, not just drought-tolerant plants. Her gardens are not only beautiful and drought-tolerant, but they also have a regard for the larger environment.

Preparation for her gardens begins with the soil. Given our limited rainfall, she stresses the importance of developing soil that the rain will sink down into deeply rather than run off. She starts by adding organic minerals to the soil. For every 100 square feet she adds

five pounds each of kelp, oyster shells and bone meal plus 10 pounds of soy meal. Every year thereafter she adds half that amount to the garden.

She amends the soil with compost. In San Francisco's sandy soil areas, she removes 12 inches or more of sand before adding compost because sand has very little water-holding capacity. She believes in mulches, particularly fir bark. Redwood does not break down enough. She does not use chemical fertilizers because she believes they destroy the soil's micro-organisms.

Mathewson uses plants that come from climates with six or more months of no rain. Surprisingly, she finds that California natives do not always out-perform the exotics from the Mediterranean, South Africa, Mexico and Australia. She removes water-guzzling plants such as impatiens, primroses, baby's tears, Japanese and Siberian Iris, hosta and nonnative ferns.

She also removes plants with invasive surface root systems such as ivy, alder, poplar, willow, acacia, Bermuda grass and spreading bamboos.

Mathewson likes to keep lawns as small as possible, and if there must be a lawn, she uses fescue. She replaces lawns for terraces surrounded by planting beds and meadows of wildflowers. She controls runoff with retaining walls to make a more gentle slope.

Contending With Deer

Gardeners who have to contend with deer will be interested in the plants **Mathewson** used for a woodland setting because deer wander freely through the Reilly back yard. Plants include California Live Oak, Japanese Maple, Sweet Olive, Butterfly Bush, Australian Bluebells, Native Iris, native ferns, Beach Aster, Bearberry, Wild Ginger, and Pink Jasmine.

Her experience is similar to mine in dealing with deer. Because deer relish succulent new growth, build a temporary fence or wire cage to keep deer out until the plant is established.

This summer is an opportunity to be inspired by the successes of garden designers like **Mathewson**. Now is the time to rethink your garden design and be ready for the planting season this fall.

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