



1. Identify Garden Rooms and Their Function

Recognize that there are a distinct set of garden rooms at your home, just like inside the home (back patio, back hillside, front entry, side yard planter, parking strip etc.). When you understand their primary use, you will discover elements to making them more beautiful and sustainable.

Every window in the home that looks out upon the garden is a potential masterpiece. Many garden rooms are purely decorative and have minor functional use. We don't use all the garden rooms equally and some window views are more critical than others. Renovate these spaces with two ideas in mind: to maximize the beauty of these spaces for viewing and to reduce the resources needed to maintain them.



2. Remove Unnecessary Turf

Create garden rooms that will delight you and your family year round. Turf is important for play area, animals and entertaining. But if you need its lush green color for decorative purposes, many groundcovers can accomplish the same goal with a fraction of the maintenance and water demands. But far too often, turf is used where it is not needed. This is the biggest mistake of Western gardens. If you have a narrow side yard, consider stepping stones or an alternative surface walkway. Do you use the front lawn for play or just the backyard? If so, make a garden in the front yard and reserve the play area for the back. Avoid using turf on hillsides and tiny pocket spaces. Sustainability means using resources wisely. Turf equals water + energy use. Minimize it wherever possible.



3. Add Desired Hardscape Elements

What role do hardscape elements (decks, fences, gates, arbors, patios etc) play in sustainability? One area they impact the landscape is in the area of recharging groundwater. Concrete patios, walkways and other surfaces like decks shed water and traditionally send it into the street. Sustainable landscapes work to keep the water on the property when possible using permeable surfaces, clever catch basins and appropriate grading. Give the water that comes on to your property places to collect and percolate. Provide overflow grading for torrential rainstorms. Dry creek beds are wonderful for this purpose.



4. Evaluate Your Irrigation System

Checking your irrigation system for breaks and leaks is a must. Like checking the oil in your car, you must periodically check your irrigation system. One of the most important checks is what settings you have on your controller. They must be changed to conform to weather patterns to be efficient. Consider a retrofit using more modern irrigation technology. Rotor spray heads, drip irrigation and weather-based controllers offer great savings.



5. Right Plant in the Right Place

California native plants and many of its Mediterranean relatives are accustomed to getting water one season out of four. They are adapted to living with less irrigation and rainfall than plants that hail from temperate climates. Furthermore, putting sun plants in the shade and shade plants in the sun create pest issues and increased water needs. Work with your nursery and landscape professionals to learn how to plant in the right places.



6. Improve Your Soil

Most Western soils are clay soils. They compact easily which means when you water, it tends to run off rather than percolate. By amending the soil with organic matter, you not only enrich the growing medium but you also allow water to more easily reach the root system of the plants in your garden. Healthy soil is the foundation of a healthy landscape. Large bark chips might look like they are helping the soil but they are not. They actually deplete the soil by robbing it of mineral and nutrients expended towards the effort to decompose the wood chips. Soil improvement requires partially decomposed organic material being worked into the soil to a sufficient depth.



7. Improve the Grading

Keeping water on the property is a central aim of the sustainable landscape. Find out where the down spouts from your roof drain. Find out how water moves off your property during torrential rainstorms. Dry creek beds and gravel walkways can be utilized to capture water. If the grading is done well, catch basins allow the water to pool during storms and percolate into the ground over time. Mounding and swales provide interesting visible contours to the garden in addition to satisfying the drainage issue.



8. Mulch to Retain Water and Suppress Weeds

There are few things that brighten a garden more than mulch. It is the equivalent of filling in color between the lines with crayons. By adding a couple of inches of decomposing soil amendment or enriched garden soil over the open spaces in your garden, you will be effectively minimizing evaporation of the water you put on your landscape and suffocating unwanted weeds. It also helps to allow natural leaf drop to mix in with the compost and continue the plant soil recharge cycle we so often interrupt with our rakes and blowers.



9. Set Your Irrigation Controller Properly

For water efficiency, the centerpiece of sustainability is managing your controller wisely. Many water agencies have online water calculators that will help you determine settings for each of your stations. Using the seasonal adjust button that many controllers have, you can modify all the settings with one button to conform to weather patterns. The principle is simple: you should water when the garden needs water and refrain when it doesn't. There are many resources from your water agency that will help you determine the difference.



10. The Power of Professionals

If you are renovating your landscape for sustainability, why not bring in a professional to help you? If you are worried about the price tag, consider this: the advice you get will save you money over and over again through the months and years. Additionally, you can do the work yourself and get cost effective guidance from a professional. Garden designers (see APLD.org) are a great source for planning and doing the work yourself inexpensively. Landscape contractors have their own state-wide trade organizations also and will provide many of these same services. For large scale projects, landscape architects might be the best fit. Nursery professionals are a great source of horticultural advice too.



11. Adopt the Garden as a Family Member

Keep an eye on it like a good parent. The garden is alive and will provide you with enjoyment and beauty that is impossible to measure. Seeing butterflies and hummingbirds frequent your garden, listening to the songs of newly arrived birds that have found your sanctuary, watching your plants mature slowly and incrementally, seeing flowers pop open on your new garden stage, having neighbors and friends drop by to compliment your improvement to the neighborhood are a few of the little pleasures that a sustainable garden brings.

