



# Members' Advice Sheet

## Drought-resistant gardening

Schoolgrounds-UK is one of the membership services from Learning through Landscapes. For more information about memberships visit [www.ltl.org.uk](http://www.ltl.org.uk) or call 01962 845811.

Water is an essential requirement for plant growth. It is a limited and valuable natural resource, and we should all make economical use of water by understanding the needs of plants and taking steps to reduce water loss from plants and the soil.

You can reduce your use of water in the school grounds through:

- Choosing plants that need little water;
- Using mulches and other methods to reduce evaporation;
- Economical watering techniques;
- Using stored and waste water.

As well as saving the environment, wise water use will save money if your water usage is metered.

### Choosing plants

Some plants resist water shortages much better than others. As well as using drought-resistant plants through the grounds, you could make a feature of them by creating a themed garden - for example a Mediterranean garden, a gravel garden, or a Japanese garden. Many are also suitable for sensory gardens (e.g. lavender for smell, alchemilla and stachys for texture) or to attract birds and insects. There are lots of ideas for such themes in garden design books or on the internet.

Plant in autumn and spring so that new plants get the best chance of growing roots before dry weather begins.

### Shrubs for dry sunny positions

Abelia  
Buddleia  
Ceanothus  
Cistus  
Cotoneaster [P]  
Cytisus  
Escallonia  
Genista  
Hebe  
Lavender  
Phormium [S]  
Potentilla  
Rosemary  
Sage  
Santolina  
Senecio [P]  
Yucca [S]

### Hardy perennials for dry sunny positions

Acanthus [S]  
Achillea  
Alstroemeria  
Bergenia  
Crocosmia  
Dianthus (pinks)  
Gypsophila  
Helianthemum (rock rose)  
Kniphofia (red hot poker)  
Nepeta (catmint)  
Papaver (poppy) [P]  
Penstemon  
Pulsatilla  
Sedum  
Thyme

### Hardy perennials for dry, coastal locations

Achillea  
Crambe  
Dianthus (pinks)  
Eryngium (sea holly) [S]  
Helianthemum (rock rose)  
Kniphofia (red hot poker)  
Nepeta (catmint)  
Papaver (poppy) [P]  
Sedum

### Shrubs for dry shade

Amelanchier  
Berberis [P,S]  
Box  
Cotoneaster [P]  
Hedera (ivy) [P]  
Mahonia [P]  
Skimmia

### Hardy perennials for dry shade

Ajuga (bugle)  
Alchemilla (lady's mantle)  
Bergenia  
Lamium  
Pulmonaria (lungwort)  
Vinca

### Shrubs for dry, coastal locations

Buddleia  
Caryopteris  
Cistus  
Cytisus  
Escallonia  
Genista  
Hebe  
Lavender  
Olearia  
Phormium [S]  
Potentilla  
Pyracantha [P,S]  
Rosemary

The Schoolgrounds-UK Advice Line is open Monday to Friday all year round

tel: 01962 845811

email: [member@ltl.org.uk](mailto:member@ltl.org.uk)

### Health & Safety

Some drought-resistant plants you see listed elsewhere may not be safe for school grounds use. The plants on this advice sheet exclude those which are particularly poisonous. Those marked [P] carry a small risk of poisoning and those marked [S] are spiny or have sharp leaves. Before using these plants carry out a risk assessment. Risk-minimising actions include planting where young children will not be able to reach any poisonous parts (usually berries) or where children will not fall or run onto spiny plants, and educating children about safe plant use.



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Sage  
Senecio  
Tamarix  
Ulex (gorse) [S]  
Yucca [S]

**Ground cover plants** suppress weed and shade the ground, preventing loss of moisture through evaporation. To get the fastest weed-smothering effect, plant ground cover plants in groups of three and mulch around them to start with, to help them get established. From then on, they will suppress the weeds themselves.

There are many excellent ground cover plants to choose from. The following are worth considering:

Ajuga (bugle)  
Alchemilla mollis (lady's mantle)  
Geranium (hardy garden varieties)  
Ground cover roses  
Lamium 'White Nancy'  
Nepeta (catmint)  
Pulmonaria (lungwort)  
Sedum spectabile (ice plant)  
Stachys lanata/byzantina (lamb's ears)  
Vinca minor (periwinkle)

### Reducing evaporation

Mulching with a layer of organic matter or gravel, at least 5cm (2in) thick, or using opaque mulching sheets, reduces the loss of soil moisture from the soil. Mulching also reduces weeds, which will compete for water.

Hedges, fences and other shelter reduce the evaporation due to wind and provide shading to help reduce water loss.

Raising the height of mowing the grass reduces water loss as the foliage shades lower leaves and the soil.

### Watering wisdom

Not everything needs watering even in dry spells - established shrubs and trees should have good enough root systems to find water deep down, and grass will quickly recover even if it goes brown.

Concentrate your watering on plants in pots and young plants. Fruit and vegetables will usually crop adequately

without watering but the quantity and quality of produce is greatly improved by watering at times when drought stress would affect the part of the plant that is gathered. When it's the leaves that are harvested, the crop should never be short of water.

Aim to apply water only at the stem bases beneath the foliage canopy leaving the surrounding soil dry. This limits weed problems and ensures all water goes to where it does most good. Light soils need watering more frequently than heavy soils, and because heavy soils hold more water heavier applications of water can be given. Only the root zone or top 60cm (2ft) of soil must be wetted - water that penetrates deeper will be inaccessible to plant roots. Gardeners are usually advised to water early in the morning or in the evening to reduce evaporation, but this is often not possible for schools.

### Water storage

Rainwater can be collected, and stored in water butts, from the roof of your school buildings. However, most water falls in winter, and would have to be stored for use in summer, when it will be quickly used up, so this is not a complete solution.

You could also investigate reusing wastewater, for example from the kitchens, but while household soaps and detergents are harmless to plants, bleaches, disinfectants and stronger cleaning products must not be used on plants.

### Further information

Most gardening information sources now include advice about water use and conservation. Particularly useful is the RHS website, [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

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