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Water-wise garden can be designed from the roots up

This quiet spot in a waterwise garden was designed by landscape designer Jodie Cook.

By NICOLE GREGORY | Orange County Register
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If you're ready to transform your property into one that requires less water, it's smart to consult a landscape designer who is knowledgeable in this area, so it can be done right.

Most obviously, a landscape designer will know the bloom cycles of plants so your yards will have color year-round, points out Jodie Cook, a San Clemente designer who specializes in California-friendly landscaping.

But a landscape designer can also help restore your soil so your plantings have a good beginning. "Many people don't realize that absolutely everything begins with healthy soil," Cook says. This means making sure the soil is not compacted. "Compacted soil is like a brick, and soil needs water and air to infiltrate it." So aerating the soil is the first step. Adding compost is the next. "It should have certain bacteria and worms to create nutrition in the soil." In this foundation of good soil, your plants will thrive.

Cook is the director of gardens at the Casa Romantica historic house, a member of the Master Gardeners of Orange County and part of the Water Quality Outreach Committee.

A landscape designer can also help you pick the appropriate plants for different spaces on your property, and create an overall design that will be pleasing year-round, and yet will not need fertilizers.

If you're new to the area, finding this kind of expert is especially important, as the plant needs in Southern California can be very different from those in the rest of the country.

Cook says she talks to new clients about what they want to do, and encourages them to find photos of gardens that show what they're imagining. Then she visits a client's property and will draw up a base plan that will be revised several times after reviewing it with the client. Once the concepts have fully evolved and have been approved, she will create the final plan and begin working with a contractor.

Because of this necessary and close collaboration, it's important to find the right designer. "I would look for someone who not only has an understanding of plants and soil, but who also has a background of design," Cook says. Look for a designer who is active in landscape designer organizations, she suggests, such as the Association of Professional Landscape Designers, a national group with chapters around the country.

But the more you know about California-friendly gardening, the better you will be able to care for your garden. "Right now a really great thing is happening," says Cook, explaining that the Orange County Water District is offering free classes for homeowners on Saturday mornings on California-friendly landscaping, irrigation systems and how to build living soil.

Another key point: Make sure your regular gardener understands what your new water-wise garden is all about.