The Thrifty Gardener

There is something magical about rain. Growing up in Southern California during one of the worst droughts the state had ever seen, I didn't see too much of it in my younger years. And as a California girl through and through, I certainly prefer a sunny day to a dark and stormy one. And yet, there is something about the rain, particularly in the garden. I don't know if it is the quality of the water, the distribution over the leaves and roots, the way it soaks into the soil, or purely the sheer amount of water the plants get over many days, but something happens when it rains that is downright alchemical. As Californians we see this each spring in the vibrant greens, yellows, oranges, and purples which paint our hills; as gardeners we see this in a garden suddenly come alive.

Spring Planting:



On March 20th, we will officially welcome Spring. This is the season of showers, and eventually flowers! One of the thriftiest ways to plant in the spring is to sow seeds the day before it rains. The seeds will then be watered in by the storm and, in my experience, have a much better chance of germinating. This works particularly well for carrots, which require near-constant moisture to germinate but are much less water hungry later on.

Spring is a great time to plant flowers, but of course as thrifty gardeners, we want those flowers to pull double duty. This year, I am most excited about snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus)* and "everlasting blooms", flowers that preserve when dried and last for years! Snapdragons are striking plants with beautiful flower spikes which come in many varieties and colors. Their flowers can last up to two weeks as cut flowers and if that is not enough, every part of the plant is edible! While they are not the tastiest, snapdragons can be used as a beautiful garnish and are excellent to grow around young children and pets because they are completely non-toxic. If buying snapdragon starts from a plant shop keep in mind that anything not marked as organic has likely been sprayed with a pesticide. Yet another argument for growing from seed! Everlasting blooms are also excellent cut flowers. They can be used fresh or dried and, if dried properly, they will retain their color and last for years. The most common everlasting bloom that we see in our area is Statice or Sea Lavender* (Limonium perezii) but strawflowers (*Xerochrysum bracteatum)* are also quite popular. I am also planning to try Gomphrena (*Gomphrena globosa)* this year. It is an everlasting bloom and some varieties can be brewed as tea! To dry flowers, hang them upside down in a bouquet or individually in a dry place out of direct sunlight.

It may feel early, but March is also when we can start thinking about planting seedlings for the warmer months. I have already put some summer squash in the ground and plan to start winter squash, tomatoes, and peppers as early as April. Seeds are the thriftiest garden option, they are cheap and, in many cases, absolutely prolific. If you grow heirloom or open planted varieties you can collect seeds from the crops that did well last season, and not spend a single cent (or I suppose a nickel these days) on new seeds besides your initial investment. Consult the Master Gardener Planting Calendar and this Vegetable Planting Table for more ideas on what to plant in March!

Planting Natives:



Native plants are an extremely thrifty landscaping choice because they are water wise and adapted to our mediterranean environment, often making them relatively easy to grow. The best time to plant natives is in the fall and winter, which means there is still a little bit of time! Planting at this time means that plants can get established before the heat of summer and require less water investment due to cooler winter temperatures. This technique also works for perennials like fruit trees and berry bushes! When planting natives, especially when landscaping, many people opt for buying larger plants. That being said, the thriftiest option (as always) is seeds. I have been able to grow multiple Sages (Salvia sp.) and Miner's Lettuce (Claytonia perfoliata) from seed. If you are willing to wait a little while for your plants to size up, seeds can be a great option!

There are so many beautiful native plants, it can be hard to decide where to start. Whether you're interested in landscaping your yard with natives, or just dipping a toe into the native plant scene, Calscape is an incredible resource. Bloom! California is another great resource and has garden templates which you can use to inspire your own native garden. Both of these free tools include a nursery locator to help connect people to nurseries growing native plants. In our area, both the Ventura and Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens carry many native plants and seeds are an excellent place to start when looking to plant natives.

*Sea Lavender is non-native and can be invasive in dune or marsh environments. If you live close to the beach consider planting another everlasting bloom. More info on Sea Lavender and its potential to be invasive here.

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