

As we lurch from drought to downpour, how do we keep our gardens looking good? National Trust and RHS gardeners offer some advice we can all use

by LUCY HALL

The long, hot summer of 1976 is seared on the memories of those who lived through it. After an exceptionally dry 12 months, the mercury soared on 23 June and barely dipped for two months of record-breaking heat and drought in the southern half of Britain.

Parched earth, standpipes and sunburn were the norm, while we were urged to save water and 'bath with a friend'.

It remains the yardstick against which all subsequent dry, hot summers are measured and it's still the hottest summer on record for its average maximum temperatures.

Five decades on, the headlines have barely changed – with record temperatures in England and Wales, depleted reservoirs, and homes cut off from mains water. What's different from 50 years ago is that a month of rain – as fell in September 1976, breaking the drought – won't solve our water problems.

Demand far outstrips supply on the hottest days. Some households in Kent can no longer turn on the taps and assume that water will flow. Within 25 years, it's predicted demand will surpass supply by 5 billion litres of water per day in England and Wales – equivalent to one-third of our daily water use right now.

'What's changed from the 1970s is we're getting more extreme weather – with hotter, drier summers and warmer, wetter winters,' explains the Royal Horticultural Society's water expert, senior scientist Dr Nicholas Cryer. 'So rather than thinking this will pass and we'll get back to normal, we've got to recognise that extremes are the new normal, so our gardening practices must change.'

Nicholas is exploring ways to help the society's five public gardens remain beautiful in the face of these extremes, and embed new methods that home gardeners can easily replicate. But if your usual approach is to turn on the hose in high summer, he has bad news.

'We're not going to be able to use mains water for gardening in the future,' Nicholas



Make every drop count

warns. 'Even if it's not formally banned outright, I think it will become socially unacceptable. Moving people away from using mains drinking water on gardens to rainwater and grey water will do a lot to make gardening sustainable.'

It starts in the ground under our feet, explains Nicholas. 'In a typical British garden, the potential for water capture in the soil is huge where the space is planted, not paved – meaning less run-off into drains and less flooding.'

To create water-holding soil, never leave it bare and avoid too much digging, both of which cause evaporation, he advises. Planting

borders with overlapping layers of trees, shrubs and perennials means the foliage will absorb rain while shading the ground beneath, keeping it cooler than if left bare. Mulching in autumn and spring – with compost or chipped bark – improves the soil's structure and boosts its ability to retain moisture. And unless your soil is highly compacted – as it can be in new build homes – he suggests going no-dig in your borders, to improve soil structure and water holding.

Nicholas is also keen to promote shade in our gardens. While this would once have been seen as a problem, the cooling effect of sitting under a tree is welcome relief. 'Shade can give you maybe six degrees of cooling on a hot day,' he explains. 'You'll get a couple more from evaporation – so a leafy canopy, with multiple layers of planting, is good for you, for water use and biodiversity.'

The fashion for replacing lawns could also wane, he suggests, once appreciation grows that they're not just good for birds and wildlife, but are brilliant for water storage and lowering temperatures.

'The single biggest thing you can do to save water in a drought is not water your lawn,' says Nicholas. 'But we want a green lawn in the summer because of the cooling effect from evaporation, so how can we retain that effect? Part of the answer is grey water. We think people can capture 60 to 70 litres per day from washing-up and showers, which is more than most gardens currently need. Grey water is fine to use over the summer – though never on leafy veg – but any longer and there's a risk of salts building up in plants. In the end, it's down to how we prioritise our limited resources.'

Lawns and planting choices are also under review across the National Trust's 180 historic gardens and parks, as it plans for the future in a changing climate. Routine watering stopped at all Trust properties in 2025, even iconic gardens such as Sissinghurst and Hidcote, while many grassy areas are left to grow longer. As horticultural adviser Rebecca Bevan explains: 'We have to garden with the climate we have, and if a plant needs constant watering, it's the wrong plant in the wrong place.'



The ripple effect

Above: collect as much rainwater as possible. **Below right:** the days of lush clipped lawns 12 months a year are over

'We have to garden with the climate we have... if a plant needs constant watering, it's the wrong plant in the wrong place'

'So we're asking our teams to look at their capacity for change. And unless a planting scheme is historically significant – like at Mottisfont – now is the time to adapt.'

Some of the results have been surprising, she admits. 'It's given teams the chance to observe what genuinely copes. And at both Hidcote and Sissinghurst, they feel they're training their plants to be more resilient than expected.'

Plants naturally draw upon the water that's available but if this reduces, she explains, they respond by altering their water uptake and, in time, adapting their leaves to reduce water loss, so effectively making themselves more drought tolerant.

Meanwhile, some gardens on heavy clay, or in low-lying areas, are also dealing with winter wet alongside summer drought. Finding plants that tolerate both extremes is challenging, she says, but not impossible.

Rebecca is compiling a database of plants that are coping best, to help teams make more sustainable choices and reduce their





dependence on annuals and containers.

'It's early days, but we're seeing some patterns,' she says. 'Among perennials, deeper-rooted umbels seem very tolerant

of extremes. And modern shrub roses bred for disease-resistance are also proving to be resilient.'

The biggest lesson for home gardeners from across the Trust's gardens is that autumn is the new planting season. 'Spring is no longer reliable, because the ground warms up and dries out, then we get cold winds or sudden heat,' explains Rebecca. 'September and October are much more dependable. Do your lifting, dividing and planting then, when the soil is warm and moist, and we're heading into a wet winter.'

Planting in autumn allows you to scale back on plant size: going big in spring for impact is the road to high-maintenance disaster, says Rebecca. 'A small plant in autumn establishes far better than a big plant in spring, as it's more resilient and needs far less water. It costs you less and gives you a bigger impact in the end.'

This new approach to gardening, with a reduced planting palette, altered timings and alternative approaches, needs us all to think differently, Rebecca believes.

'We know that most visitors follow our lead, so we've decided we can't maintain the charade of green lawns through summer,'

Light and shade

Clockwise from top: make use of natural cover; water butts matter more than ever; Sissinghurst Castle and Garden



10 WAYS TO CUT WATER USE

1. Capture every drop

Install water butts wherever you can.

2. Line terracotta pots

Terracotta dries quickly. Line with plastic compost bags to slow evaporation and cut watering.

3. Plant fewer but bigger pots

Containers are thirsty. Reduce the number, retiring thirsty small pots in favour of larger ones.

4. Plant in autumn – not spring

Autumn planting means warm soil, regular rain and less watering. Use 9cm pots, bare-root or plug plants, which settle faster with less water.

5. Boost soil health

Improved soil holds water. Add compost, mulch if planting isn't possible, underplant bare areas around trees/shrubs, and don't compact wet soil.

6. Choose deep-rooted plants

Use plants that cope in both drought and winter wet, such as sanguisorba, persicaria, veronicastrum, and modern shrub roses.

7. Let lawns rest

Brown summer lawns recover with autumn rain.

8. Retire the sprinkler

One hour can use 1,000 litres of water – two days' worth for a typical family.

9. Water deeply – not often

Soak the soil thoroughly. Shallow, frequent watering encourages weak, surface-level roots.

10. Stop watering plants that can't cope

If a plant needs constant watering to survive, replace it with something better suited to your conditions.

she says. 'All water is precious, and we have a responsibility to influence public opinion.'

'We need a cultural shift away from the instant "big reveal" in spring and expectations of immaculate lawns and constant colour. We're moving to the honesty of resilient gardens, where we match plants to the conditions that let them thrive. And they're all the more beautiful for that.' ☼