

# Creating a waterwise tropical garden.

Developing a tropical garden involves a careful selection of mostly bold foliage plants to provide shade, shelter and colour throughout the year. Many plants from the tropics need a lot of water on a regular basis but there are some plants from the tropics and other plants with a tropical look that can be used to create a tropical garden that doesn't need a lot of water. What's right for your garden will depend on the size and style of your garden and the overall effect you want to achieve.

For your tropical garden to be successful and rewarding it is essential to carry out soil improvement prior to planting, mulch after planting, and install an efficient irrigation system.

## SOIL IMPROVEMENT

Soil improvement should be carried out prior to planting. The best soil improver is organic matter. It dramatically increases the moisture and nutrient holding capacity of sandy soil and encourages the all important soil micro fauna that are vital for healthy plant growth.

Improving the soil is a simple process:

- Dig a hole 25 to 30cm deep and, at a minimum, 3 times the width of the pot. The wider the better.
- Replace half the soil with organic matter.
- Mix thoroughly and replace in the hole in a shallow saucer shape.
- Take the plant out of the pot and place in the bottom of the saucer.
- Water in well, applying a wetting agent if necessary.
- Organic matter can be purchased as compost, soil improver or soil conditioner.

In addition to organic matter, the following can also be incorporated into the soil at planting time:

- Bentonite Clay (sandy soils only).
- Gypsum (reactive clay soils only).
- Spongelite and Zeolite (all soil types).
- Water storage polymers sold as granules or in sealed bags.

## MULCHING

Bare soil encourages weeds, wastes water and increases stress upon plants. A waterwise mulch spread to a depth of 50 to 75mm will reduce evaporation from the soil surface by as much as 70%. It will also prevent erosion, reduce weeds, reduce temperature fluctuation in the soil, slowly break down over time to feed the soil and improve the overall appearance of the garden. A good Waterwise mulch is one that has large, irregularly shaped particles that hold little, if any, water. Always keep mulch just clear of stems and trunks and be prepared to spread more mulch over the surface as the material breaks down to feed the soil.

## IRRIGATION

The most efficient irrigation systems are those that deliver the right amount of water to the right place, at the right time, and with a minimum of wastage. The simplest and most efficient system available to the home gardener is known variously as sub-irrigation, integrated dripper or in-line dripper. It is simple to install and delivers water directly to the root system with little or no evaporative loss. It is also subject to a Waterwise rebate. For details on the Waterwise rebates available go to [www.water.wa.gov.au](http://www.water.wa.gov.au).

For further information and expert assistance with irrigation, contact either your local Waterwise Garden Irrigator or Waterwise Irrigation Design Shop. To find your closest Waterwise Specialist check on [www.watercorporation.com.au](http://www.watercorporation.com.au) or call the Waterwise Helpline on 13 10 39.

## WATERING ZONES

Grouping plants with similar water needs together into watering zones where they can be watered only according to their needs ensures that no plants are over or under watered and therefore makes the most efficient use of the water.

Plants can be placed into one of 3 groups according to their watering needs. These classifications refer to the frequency of watering in summer when the plants have been established in improved soils. NB: at other times of year, all plants will need watering less frequently.



# Tropical plants and the water each one requires.

'Three Drop' plants require watering every one to two days in summer (more often than the two day a week watering roster in place for communities on scheme water south of Kalbarri and Kalgoorlie). 'Two Drop' plants require watering every three to seven days in summer (the watering roster of twice a week is mostly adequate for these plants). 'One Drop' plants require watering no more often than once a week in summer. Many one drop plants need less frequent watering (twice a week watering is too much for these plants).

Your local Waterwise Garden Centres can assist with plant selection and water needs. To find your closest Waterwise Garden Centre, check on [www.watercorporation.com.au](http://www.watercorporation.com.au) or call the Waterwise Helpline on 13 10 39.

## SOME WATERWISE PLANTS FOR A TROPICAL GARDEN



The following short list of One Drop plants for tropical gardens is a selection taken from the Waterwise Plants for Perth database on the Water Corporation's website. To view images of these plants, browse other tropical plants (over 240) or select plants for your particular needs, go to [www.watercorporation.com.au](http://www.watercorporation.com.au)

NB: The information on the website is tailored to the Metropolitan area. However, it is relevant for most of the South West of WA.

### PALMS

#### Alexander Palm - *Archontophoenix alexandrae*

Fast growing, graceful Australian palm with a straight clean grey trunk and green sheath and fronds.

#### Bangalow Palm, Piccabeen - *Archontophoenix cunninghamii*

Australian palm with slender trunk and hardy foliage. When mature produces large drooping clusters of tiny pink flowers followed by berries that turn red on maturity.

#### Washington Fan Palm - *Washingtonia robusta*

A slow growing, large palm developing a slender trunk that may reach to 25m high.

#### Foxtail Palm - *Wodyetia bifurcata*

A highly ornamental fast growing palm to 15m with a smooth ringed trunk and long arching deep green foxtail fronds. May struggle where limestone is close to the surface.

### PLANTS 1 TO 2M HIGH

#### Green Mist - *Acacia cognata*

A shrub to about 2 metres high with pendulous thin foliage, bronze new growth and pale yellow flowers. Lightly prune after flowering to maintain the shape.

#### Desert Rose, Impala Lily - *Adenium obesum*

Warmth-loving succulent that grows to 1m or more high with a thick succulent trunk and branches, bright green leaves and large showy flowers in summer to autumn.

#### Tall Baeckea Clarence River - *Babingtonia virgata*

A slow growing shrub to about 2m with fine, deep green, dense foliage and massed small white flowers in summer.

#### Bottlebrush Little John - *Callistemon viminalis*

Slow growing shrub with compact dense blue-grey foliage and short dark crimson red terminal flowers over a long period.

#### Cordyline - *Cordyline* Cultivars

A group of plants with strap like foliage. Most form a deep tap root and above ground stem as they mature. Mature height is between 1.5 and 3 metres. Those based upon *C. australis* are usually hardy.

#### Jade Plant - *Crassula argentea*

Thick stemmed, shrub like, branching succulent with thick dark green leaves and sprays of white to pale pink star flowers in autumn.

#### Gynea Lily - *Doryanthes excelsa*

Long broad strap leaves form a clump to 2m across and 1.5m high. Stout upright flowering stems reach as high as 6 metres carrying a large cluster of dark red nectar rich flowers.

#### Crown of thorns - *Euphorbia milii*

Stout stems bearing spiral patterns of small thorns and a few leaves towards the top. Colourful small clusters of flowers are produced throughout the warmer months.

#### Mauritius Hemp - *Furcraea foetida*

A fast growing succulent which forms a large round clump of stiff green leaves. Mature plants produce very tall slender flower spikes carrying greenish-yellow fragrant flowers.

#### Coconut Ice - *Grevillea*

Fast growing, spreading, medium sized shrub to about 1.5m high and 2m wide. Soft divided foliage and large clusters of pink and orange flowers throughout the warmer months.

#### Elegance - *Grevillea longistyla*

Fast growing upright, open shrub to 2m high and 1.5m wide. Slender deep green foliage and bright red flowers in clusters from late winter to early summer. Bird attractant.

#### Wax Flower - *Philothea myoporoides*

A medium sized evergreen shrub with dense, dark green and glossy, aromatic foliage. Massed white, waxy, lightly fragrant star flowers are produced from late winter to spring.

Remember, that by investing in waterwise planning and preparation of your garden now, you will reap savings in the cost of water in the future. For more waterwise plants go to The Waterwise Plants for Perth database on [www.watercorporation.com.au](http://www.watercorporation.com.au) under 'Being Waterwise'.