You have heard what they say about Seattle: It rains all the time. Yet we who garden in the Northwest know all about the long, dry summer and the horticultural challenge it presents. Without copious irrigation, many traditional garden plants from areas with summer rain—including Asia and the East Coast of the U.S.—do not do their best here. There is an alternative approach to using these plants, promoted by advocates of sustainable gardening: Choose species and varieties that can handle our wet winters and springs, while also thriving in our dry summers.

Shelagh Tucker chose the climate–suitable alternative when she replaced her thirsty front lawn near Carkeek Park in north Seattle with a new garden in 2003, a time when water bills were spiking. She called me to work on the re–design. “I don’t want to water anymore,” she said. “Let’s talk about a Mediterranean garden,” she said.

The front yard looked enormous to both of us. It measured 75 by 55 feet and sloped from the house to the street, with nothing to give it scale but brown lawn. The new design included a 20–foot–diameter, circular stone terrace that created a level area in the center of the slope. A
series of new stairs connected the front door to the street. Shelagh chose buff-colored gravel for informal paths that knitted planting bed islands together. Natural rock was chosen to complement the rustic stone walls and paving. Rock Solid Landscapes, the landscape contractor, did a careful job on the construction.

**Experimenting With Plants**

Shelagh put together the original plant list, but like many gardens, hers has developed over time through a process of trial and error. One source of botanical inspiration has been Beth Chatto, the British plantswoman and author, whose famous gravel garden features plants that do well in poor soil with no irrigation. Shelagh has also been inspired by art—she herself is a skilled painter and brings a trained eye to her garden, which looks good in all seasons. Even on a gray winter day, contrasts of foliage color, texture and shape provide stunning combinations.

Shelagh found her sunny, open, south-facing slope perfect for summer-dry plants. “Summer-dry” is the term she uses now to describe her garden, rather than “Mediterranean.” After more than a decade of experimentation, she feels that many plants from the Mediterranean don’t like our colder winters. Also, focusing on “summer dry” plants has made a lot more available. Besides the Mediterranean, there are four other major wet-winter/summer-dry regions of the world: the West Coast of North America, western Chile, Southwest Australia and South Africa. Seattle gardeners can turn to all of them for potential plant choices.

Soil preparation for the new garden included tilling coarse gravel (5/8-inch minus crushed rock) into the loamy soil to create good drainage.

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*A circular stone terrace creates a level space in the sloping yard. The low stone walls also serve as benches. (Photo by Phil Wood)*
Soggy soil is the enemy, but cold temperature is also a consideration. Seattle is at the northernmost tip of the West Coast’s summer–dry range. Moreover, at 300 feet above sea level, Shelagh’s garden is cooler in the winter than gardens in many other parts of Seattle. The plants that she trials must run the gauntlet of dry summers and wet, cold winters.

When she was establishing the garden, Shelagh provided irrigation for the new plantings during their first year, and she does the same today for any new additions. She continues to experiment and suggests trying the same plant in three different locations in your garden in order to find its most suitable microclimate. She shares her knowledge generously, offering opportunities for groups to visit. Visitors this year include the Northwest Perennial Alliance Open Gardens program and the Northwest Horticulture Society Meet the Board Tour.

Successful Selections
In Shelagh’s planting plan, trees bring height to the design. Shelagh chose four Japanese snowbell trees (*Styrax japonicus*) to create a semicircle around the terrace. A crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica* ‘Tuscarora’) reaches 25 feet. Crape myrtles need heat to bloom; Shelagh located hers next to her driveway, which provides enough radiant energy for the plant to bloom nearly every year. An eastern redbud cultivar (*Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’) adds purple foliage. Dwarf strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo* ‘Compacta’) has grown larger than expected—it’s now a 15-foot tree. This southern European native provides glossy evergreen leaves and bears both flowers and strawberry-colored fruit in the fall. Other trees that have thrived include Arizona cypress (*Cupressus arizonica* ‘Blue Ice’) and *Eucalyptus archeri*.

Shrubs provide an intermediate layer. *Grevillea victoriae* ‘Murray Valley Queen’, native to Australia, grows four to six feet and offers grey-green narrow leaves and orange winter flowers. Shelagh likes that this cultivar is lower-growing than the straight species.

Rockroses (*Cistus*), Mediterranean natives, lend their sprawling evergreen presence, along with late-spring flowers. Crimson spot rockrose (*Cistus ladanifer*) grows three to four feet high and bears white flowers with crimson spots. A lower-growing plant, sageleaf rockrose (*C. salviifolius* ‘Prostratus’)—just two feet high by
four feet wide—has white flowers with a yellow spot at the base. *Cistus x skanbergii*, covers a lot of ground (growing two feet high by eight feet wide) and boasts pure–pink flowers.

Shelagh grows *Hebe* species and cultivars from New Zealand for their neat evergreen foliage. For example, the compact *Hebe cupressoides* ‘Boughton Dome’ grows three by three feet. The fine, gray–green foliage gives it the look of a dwarf cypress. When selecting hebes for your garden, consider that larger–leaved varieties are less cold–hardy.

*Lomatia myricoides* is an evergreen vase–shaped shrub from Australia that grows up to 10 feet tall and sports elliptical, blue–green, jagged–edged leaves. The midsummer flowers are white and sweetly scented.

Common manzanita (*Arctostaphylos manzanita*), native to our West Coast, does well in just about any sunny garden with well–drained soil. Small, white flowers hang on the evergreen foliage in spring. Dark mahogany bark adds to the appeal. Varieties include ‘Dr. Hurd’ and ‘St. Helena’.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus*) is a quintessential Mediterranean plant, and the cultivar ‘Arp’ is the one Shelagh finds to be hardy in her garden. ‘Arp’ grows three feet tall and wide. Lavender (*Lavandula*) is another Mediterranean classic you’ll find in the Tucker garden. Shelagh observes that the lavenders look old after about 13 years and need replacing.

Alpine mint bush (*Prostranthera cuneata* ‘Badja Peak’) from Australia provides fine–textured, dark–green foliage with white spring flowers. It grows up to three feet tall and wide. Other successful shrubs include California lilac (*Ceanothus*) and *Ozothamnus leptophyllus*, from New Zealand.

Grasses and grass–like plants add linear texture to the garden and express the movement of the wind. Giant feather grass (*Stipa gigantea*) explodes six feet into the sky like fireworks from a three–foot clump of foliage. The open
mass of blooms offers a see-through texture. *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Avalanche’ also grows tall—up to six feet—but is more upright, like an exclamation point. Pheasants-tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*) grows to three feet tall and wide, with arching foliage and a haze of purple summer flowers. Its foliage turns copper in the winter. Leatherleaf sedge (*Carex buchananii*), from New Zealand, stays bronze all year, forming a clump up to three feet tall. Cape restio (*Rhodocoma capensis*) from South Africa makes a bold statement. This reed-like plant features arching stems dripping fine foliage and terminal blooms.

Shelagh has found that perennials in her garden don’t rebloom as well as in an irrigated garden. However, they add both color and texture to her garden compositions. Autumn sage (*Salvia greggii*) from Texas and Mexico blooms all summer and is available in a variety of colors, including purple, red, pink and white. Other valuable perennials include yarrow (*Achillea*), penstemon, phlomis, euphorbia and Russian sage (*Perovskia*). Species tulips come back, while narcissus do not return.

**Beautiful and Beneficial**

Within the constraints of our summer-dry region, Shelagh has created a beautiful and meaningful garden. Reducing irrigation preserves wildlife in rivers and wetlands and saves energy used in treating and pumping residential water. Other ecological benefits include eliminating the gasoline, fertilizer and chemical use associated with maintaining a lawn. Summer-dry plants require no added fertilizer, and so produce no harmful runoff. Finally, choosing plants that actually enjoy our summer-dry climate reinforces a sense of place, ensuring a fitting garden for the Pacific Northwest.

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