

- 7 You can plant through the mulch by cutting a hole in the cardboard, and planting into a mound of peat-free compost. Carefully replace the mulch, ensuring the cardboard does not rub against the stem

protect soil and plants from the sun

Bare soil not only provides ideal conditions for opportunistic weeds, but also heats up quickly and increases water loss through evaporation. Ground cover plants in combination with mulch will help solve both these problems, and can look and taste good – strawberries, herbs etc. A forest garden, with plants of varying heights, is particularly well adapted to provide areas of shade which will create habitats for shade tolerant plants and help reduce soil temperature. Careful selection of plants will create a plant community adapted to your needs – food, flowers, herbal remedies, basketry etc.

further information

RISC's garden website provides links to sources of information about forest gardens, green roofs and permaculture.

Dave Richards and Steve Jones, RISC's present and former gardeners, have formed a small a partnership, designing and constructing sustainable gardens: www.sector39.co.uk.



RISC's drip feed irrigation system which uses harvested rainwater

growing our futures risc's edible roof garden

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beating the drought the risc guide to low-water gardening

The hose-pipe bans of 2006 are a wake-up call for many gardeners, particularly in the south-east of England where rainfall for the past two years has been 2/3 below normal. While wine growers might welcome hotter summers, most of us have gardens designed for a 'water-on-demand' regime. Despite an upsurge in sales of water butts and pumps to siphon bath water, many gardens have wilted. Most climate scientists agree that global climate change is a reality and is like to result in greater extremes of weather. Some predict that a drought will occur every three years on average. We need to face the prospect of making our gardens thrive with limited or uncertain supplies of mains water. Is there an alternative to the wholesale conversion to Mediterranean planting?

The RISC roof garden has only 30cm of light soil and is like an enormous hanging basket – and they sometimes need watering twice a day! It was designed to be as sustainable as possible and included ways of reducing water consumption from the outset. Our experience of keeping it alive over the past two summers suggests that the future need not be limited to drought-resistant plants. If we learn the principles of water conservation gardening from people and cultures who have prospered in places with low rainfall, we can adapt or redesign our gardens to meet the challenge of uncertain rainfall, and continue to enjoy diversity and productivity in our gardens. These principles are: collect all suitable sources of water, water economically, retain moisture in the soil, and protect soil and plants from the sun.

collect all suitable sources of water

rainwater

Many gardeners already use water butts to harvest rainwater. However, a large garden with mature trees would need a small swimming pool to store enough water to cope with a prolonged dry spell. If money were no object, a 5,000 gallon cistern dug under the drive would probably do the job! For most of us, a 200 gallon water butt made from reused juice concentrate containers, is an economical way of increasing storage, but would probably not last more than a couple of weeks, even with careful watering www.tankexchange.co.uk. One way to overcome this is to use gravity to feed overflow from waterbutts into mulch basins strategically placed around the garden – storing water in the landscape. These act as reservoirs which can be tapped by plant roots. A diverter with a simple valve provides control of the amount of water entering the system, preventing waterlogged soil www.hayesplastics.com.

You can join your water butt to a simple, gravity-fed porous pipe irrigation system www.porouspipe.co.uk, but this requires well filtered water from a more sophisticated and expensive diverter to prevent clogging of the tiny holes www.rainharvesting.co.uk.