Sharon Hull, This Week in the Garden: Spring has fully sprung
By Sharon Hull Santa Cruz Sentinel Santa Cruz Sentinel
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There is no longer any doubt -- spring at last is fully "sprung" with tiny new tree leaves unfurling, flowers blooming and the urge to dig in the soil hitting most local gardeners.

This year, not only do we have the usual spring tasks, including planting, cleaning up, fertilizing and pruning, but local gardeners are having to keep in mind our too-dry winter, the second in a row. Water companies have yet to publicize summer water restrictions but are asking people to conserve voluntarily. So as responsible gardeners, most of us will be planning our gardens with low-water use in mind.

If you haven't yet converted your irrigation system to drip, this would be an excellent time to do it, while you can install the lines before the plants are too large to easily work around, and while you can still readily get into the beds without squishing or breaking something. Most garden centers and some home-supply stores have drip supplies and most brands supply a free how-to booklet. The public library also has books that describe how to install a drip system, and of course you can find multiple resources online.

This is also an excellent time to take a hard look at what you have growing where. Grouping plants that have similar water requirements makes it much easier to irrigate only as needed. And if you have bare spots in a few places, consider planting California natives or plants from other Mediterranean climates around the world, none of which will have extravagant water needs. Gradually converting most of your garden to low-water use plants will save you money in the long run and safeguard our precarious water supplies now and in future dry years. Several local nurseries specialize in natives and Mediterraneans, and most general garden centers have generous stocks as well.

If you aren't familiar with just how stunning many of our native plants can be, pay a visit to the California Collection at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum and to the native section at the Horticultural Center at Cabrillo College. Many species will be in full glorious bloom in the coming weeks. Make note of what catches your eye as you wander through the gardens so you can do a bit of research later on mature size, bloom duration and soil preference of the plants you might like to install in your own spaces. Go to the website of Las Pilitas Nursery in Escondido for abundant information on natives: www.laspilitas.com. And if you hope to attract native critters, this same site has generous sections on which birds or animals depend on various plants for food or shelter.

Mediterranean plants can also be valuable resources for wildlife, as well as beautiful and water-saving. Both the UCSC Arboretum and the Cabrillo College gardens have large sections where you can see mature blooming plants. At the arboretum, the Australian garden hosts numerous nesting hummingbirds, especially around the big old Grevilleas with their odd but lovely flowers; visit to watch the males perform the spectacular aerial swings and dives of their mating displays, and see the tiny and aggressive Allen's hummers boss around our larger and year-round resident Anna's. You'll find the Mediterranean plants in these gardens available for sale in most local nurseries. You can also buy them at Cabrillo's annual spring sale on May 10-12 (www.cabrillo.edu/academics/horticulture) and at the arboretum's annual sale on April 20 (arboretum.ucsc.edu). Both websites include a complete plant inventory. If you've never attended either sale, you'll be delighted to discover that both have the happy ambiance of small town fairs and that you'll run into most of your dedicated-gardener friends who enthusiastically attend every year without fail. Locals know that these two sales are THE place to be on those weekends.

Garden tips are provided courtesy of horticulturist Sharon Hull of the ProBuild Garden Center. Contact her at 423-0223.