



L-R: Rainbarrels are a great investment in conservation, a pretty Toronto trellis and perennial gardens are beginning to bloom



## TOP FIVE BACKYARD TRENDS IN 2010

**5 Canadians will be paying down their debt – to the soil:** As more and more Canadians realize that they cannot draw on the goodness of soil forever, they will be “giving back” by adding generous layers of organic material including compost.

**4 From garden to fork:** Inspired by the recent trend to eat food produced within 100 miles, Canadians will be growing more of their own food in their own yards and on balconies.

**3 Naturally:** Canadian gardeners are discovering, in increasing numbers, the benefits of gardening organically or (at least) in the absence of chemicals.

**2 Heritage gardening:** As more and more Canadians are prepared to pay a premium for “heritage” or “heirloom” tomatoes and other produce, they are also more interested in growing what their great-grandparents grew.

**1 Bringing nature home:** Gardeners are closely connected to the natural world and are designing their gardens in an effort to embrace the natural world around them rather than insulate themselves from it, as we did a generation ago.... As a result, lawns will get smaller, native plants will gain in popularity, and birding in all forms will continue to rise in popularity.

# Mark Cullen’s spring gardening & conservation primer

Canada’s most famous gardening guru on crafting the perfect patch to conserve our precious resources

**SPRING IS THE** perfect time to plan your gardening strategy for this growing season. I encourage all gardeners to think of ways to reduce their consumption. Water conservation is the environmentally responsible thing to do. It saves you time and allows you to enjoy more time away from the garden without worrying about its need for water. There are a number of steps you can take to conserve water and reduce your dependency on your garden hose this summer.

### Divert downspouts into rain barrels

Have rain barrels collect rainwater as a source of free, oxygen-rich, warm water for gardens and containers. Start by installing a rain barrel under each downspout to collect this valuable resource. All plants love it and respond better to rainwater than the cold water from the end of a hose.

### Discover the miracle of mulch

To reduce the need for frequent weeding and watering, I recommend a five-centimetre (two-inch) layer of finely shredded pine or cedar bark mulch throughout perennial and shrub beds. Mulching around plants reduces evaporation from the soil and therefore reduces the watering requirements of your garden dramatically.

A generous layer of mulch insulates the soil from the drying effect of the sun and wind. You will reduce your watering by up to 70 per cent as a result and your weeding by up to 90 per cent the first year.

### Water wisely

Water early in the morning when less moisture will be lost to evaporation. My rule of thumb for watering both gardens and lawns is to water deeply, usually no more than once a week. Just 2.5 centimetres (one inch) of water will usually provide moisture for a 30-centimetre (one-foot) depth of healthy soil.

It is generally best to have at least 20 centimetres (eight to nine inches) of moist soil. Infrequent but generous watering forces the roots of plants to grow deeper in search of moisture, without starving them for water. Deep roots mean that plants can better withstand short periods of drought.

### Take advantage of new products

For example, for this spring, I created Water Wick to conserve moisture. Place a Water Wick at the root zone of each new plant. These all natural “tea bags” absorb up to 400 times their weight in water. Moisture is released to the plant as needed, reducing watering by up to 50 per cent.

### Introduce native plants

Native plants have evolved here in North America over thousands of years.

Competing for their very existence, they have adapted to their environment, making them easy to grow, particularly when garden conditions are similar to their native habitat. Most native plants have few water demands and tend to be remarkably resistant to disease and insects.

### Group plants

Organize your garden by planting those with similar watering needs together. If all the drought-tolerant plants are in one area and the water lovers in another, you can avoid overwatering the less thirsty plants and eliminate the hassle of giving individual watering regimes to individual plants within a bed. This saves both water and time.

### Create windbreaks

Plant attractive hedges, a cluster of trees and shrubs, a fence or a vine-covered trellis to break the flow of wind. This reduces evaporation and wind damage to plants.

### Choose drought-tolerant plants

You might be surprised to learn how many attractive and versatile plants are drought tolerant. Remember, though, that these plants need regular watering their first year to get established, after which they will require less.

### Mark’s Top 10 drought-tolerant plants:

#### PERENNIALS

- Adam’s needle (*Yucca filamentosa*), Zone 4
- Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*), Zone 4
- Blank flower (*Gaillardia*), Zone 3
- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), Zone 3
- Stonecrop (*Sedum*), Zone 3

#### ANNUALS

- Cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*)
- Geranium (*Pelargonium*)

#### TREES AND SHRUBS

- Lilac (*Syringa*), Zone 3
- Rugosa rose (*Rosa rugosa*), Zone 3
- Spruce (*Picea*), Zone 2

I get a lot of satisfaction out of planning and growing a garden that does not demand a lot of water. This also means that it will not demand a lot of my time. Properly thought out and executed, a “low-water garden” may be the closest thing that you will get to a “low-maintenance” garden. 🍷

Stay connected with Mark Cullen: see him on CTV Canada AM every Friday morning at 8:45. Visit [www.markcullen.com](http://www.markcullen.com) for his free monthly newsletter, podcast and more.

