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You don't need me to tell you that its been hot in Mobile and Baldwin counties lately. On June 12, we set a new record high for the date of 100 degrees. And its also been dry. Alabama is in the midst of a drought, and some local communities have asked residents to cut back on water use. One easy way to cut back on water use around your home is to drought-proof your garden.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, of the 26 billion gallons of water consumed daily in the United States, approximately 30% is used for outdoor uses, and the typical suburban lawn consumes 10,000 gallons of water above and beyond rainwater each year.

By utilizing a technique known as xeriscaping, you can ensure you have a colorful, blooming garden without the heavy water bill. Xeriscaping is defined as "quality landscaping that conserves water and protects the environment," and uses water-efficient plants, such as native plants like native azalea or cosmos, which are drought tolerant, in landscaping areas. Combined with mulching and efficient irrigation, xeriscaping designs require less water, conserving the resource and lowering utility bills.

To be most effective, your xeriscape design should take into account climate and soil conditions. Consider the areas of your garden that are wet, very sunny, or shady, and plan plantings appropriately. You can obtain soil-sampling kits from your county Cooperative Extension System office to test your soil for pH, nutrient levels, and other factors.

By choosing native, drought tolerant plants over species which are susceptible to disease, hard to establish, or need frequent attention, you will not only conserve water and reduce the use of fertilizers and pesticides, but also make your garden less labor-intensive.

Mulch holds moisture in a garden, reducing the need for frequent irrigation. As an added bonus, many native plants attract butterflies and hummingbirds with their bright blooms.

Information about native plants and appropriate mulches, as well as other water conservation practices, can be obtained from your county Cooperative Extension System office. For more information about xeriscaping, check out *Water-Efficient Landscaping: Preventing Pollution & Using Resources Wisely* by the Environmental Protection Agency. This publication is available on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/waterefficiency.pdf>