

DWL Tour 2018 Essay by Natasha Shelby

Sure, water is life; but timing is everything

EMERGENCE.

Lesson: Never is a plant's existence more tenuous than at germination. Once a seedling has emerged from its protective husk, a few minutes without water sounds its proverbial death knell. To combat the vagaries of desiccation, Greenhouse#1 at the Center for Arid Lands Native Plant Nursery is its own biosphere: humidity is maintained by whirring swampcoolers; shade tarps block UV and wind; and intermittent bursts of mist fog the air. Here, seeds are coaxed to sprout. When cotyledons give way to true leaves, seedlings are potted into newsprint and moved to another glasshouse, and then another. At each move, the frequency of water exposure is reduced, while the amount of water is increased—encouraging the plants to develop deep complex root systems to prepare them for transplant.

TRANSPLANT.

Lesson: Less (often) is more when it comes to watering. At Agave Acres north of Pioneertown, water pulses from a well powered by a solar pump. Water rations are monitored to the decimal up here. The couple waters their transplants by hand, each one getting what it needs and no more. Like all these water-wise desert gardeners, they know to water deeply and infrequently—to leach out the natural desert salts and to encourage the plant roots to grow downward, ever downward—for plants have two heavens (one up and one down) on the plane of persistence.

PERSISTENCE.

Lesson: When water-wise design is practiced over time, a robust ecology can develop. At “7th Heaven” in Joshua Tree, a 25-year-plus vision has matured into a wonderland cactus garden. Raised rock beds stacked with compost hold moisture, meandering paths provide both sun and shade, rosemary hedges provide windbreaks, and the mesquite trees hum with bees. With planning and patience comes a garden working in synergy, wise beyond just water usage—an ecological treasure.