

Dear Monarch,

The plants are starting to look terrible! They “die” every winter. I expect my community’s landscape to look green year-round.

DORMANCY

Dear Concerned Resident,

Like us, plants usually only die once. What you are observing in the landscape is *dormancy*. Although we have mild winters in our area, some plants still need a seasonal rest.

- Dormancy is a way to conserve energy. Since resources are scarcer in winter, this is the season we typically associate with dormancy. You’ll see plants entering this resting state in fall, dropping leaves, and being pruned back to the ground by gardeners. This is a normal process that does not signify a lack of water or care in the landscape.
- Dormancy also helps plants naturally cope with environmental stress. In winter, losing soft tissue like delicate leaves means the plant is less susceptible to frost damage. Likewise, plants that find high temperatures stressful may go dormant through the summer instead! Many California natives die back in the heat and will bloom and grow when it’s cooler and more likely to rain.
- Why don’t we just choose plants that do not experience dormancy? The truth is all plants will have periods of rest. While they may not shed their leaves, they are not actively growing year-round. A diverse landscape is more stable, healthy, and aesthetically interesting than one with only a few, similar plants.
- Can’t we just provide extra water and fertilizer and keep them green? Plants require a break! Imagine trying to replace your sleep with coffee for three months. Through dormancy, they’re storing energy and preparing for the next season’s growth.
- While plants are resting, landscapers have a chance to focus on other aspects of maintenance. The cool season is a good time to install new plants, prune out old material, lay down mulch, prep slopes and drains for rain, prune trees (Pines, for example, lose less sap if pruned when it’s cool), and plan spring projects!

MONARCH TIP

Dormancy helps the entire landscape conserve resources! Plants need less maintenance, water, fertilizer, and pest control through the cool season.