

WATER, WATER, WATER

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Water is the lifeblood of any garden, yet the art and science of watering are often overlooked. Read on for more information on watering and water conservation.

Plants in containers dry out much faster than if they were in the ground.

Any container will dry out much faster than the ground, just because it has a much lower water holding capacity than the ground. Black plastic nursery pots absorb heat, which only makes this problem worse on hot days. So, the sooner you get your plants in the ground, the less chance your plants will dry out. Keep in mind that on hot days, the nursery will water for several hours in the morning because of this fact. If you can't plant your plants right away, try to keep them in as shady an area as possible. And you may have to water several times a day if it gets hot. Remember, the sooner you plant, the better!

Plant water-efficient plants:

When water is scarce, why not use plants that don't mind? All plants require some water to get started, but there are some plants that get by on less water than others. This practice is not new at all. It doesn't mean that you have to limit yourself to yuccas and cactus, but just be aware of what you are planting and if there is a more water efficient alternative. Also, don't use plants with high water needs in areas with plants that have low water needs. You will waste water on the low-water plants, and have a hard time keeping up with the high water plants. By grouping plants with similar water requirements you can also just turn off the water to plants that prefer it drier, saving water that would otherwise be needlessly applied.

Your soil will absorb water at different rates depending on the soil type.

Water can only soak into the soil as fast as the soil will absorb it. Sandy or loose soils will take water up very quickly, but our predominantly clay soil in this area takes its time in absorbing water. Clay particles are very small, and so it takes more effort and time for the water to soak into the tiny gaps surrounding those particles. Any water that can't soak in as it is applied will simply run off and be wasted. This will result in erosion and water waste.

Some soils already have a lot of water in them.

Areas with high water tables, or areas with lots of water draining through the area are wet enough without the addition of extra water. Some people will indiscriminately water when they start to see spring growth. This will only compound the problem of soggy areas. Be sure to monitor areas and only water when the area starts to actually need it.

Ways to deliver water to plants more efficiently:

Blasting your plants with water constantly will just irritate them and drive up your water bill. Yes, your plants need water, but the **method of delivery** is a good area to work on. High volume **overhead sprinklers** may seem easier, but they also waste an incredible amount of water. Some water evaporates before it even hits the ground. When it does hit the ground, the water volume is usually greater than what the soil can absorb, so a lot of water will simply run off and into a drain. And what water does soak into the ground will usually only soak in a short distance, which encourages roots to grow shallower. Shallow roots aren't as efficient at seeking and taking up water as deep roots. The best method of water delivery is **drip irrigation**, which applies water at a low rate, but for extended periods of time. This allows the soil time to soak the water up at its own pace. Drip irrigation systems are close to the ground, so the amount of evaporation is low. And since the soil can take the water up easier at the slower rate, runoff is kept to a minimum.

Sprinkler timers can't sense a dry plant.

With the exception of electronic leaf sprinkler sensors, there is no way for your sprinkler system to water as needed. A bad tendency is to set a timer and forget about it, which can lead to dead plants. Take the time to walk through and monitor your plantings for dry spots, wet spots, and ailing plants. You will probably need to adjust your watering system several times to get it just right.

A professionally designed irrigation system will be set up with several "zones", or sections with separate valves feeding them water from the main central valve. This allows you to turn areas off that are getting too much water, or turn water deficient areas on for extra water. Your soil can be radically different in different areas, so water will be held differently.

Timing is of the essence:

Heat evaporates water, as we all know. So why water in the middle of the afternoon when the heat is the greatest? The best time is in the evening as the temperature starts to cool, or very early in the morning before it heats up. This doesn't seem like much, but you'd be surprised at how much water you can conserve by simply eliminating the evaporation factor. It may just mean that you have to wake up earlier or go out and water later than normal, but it could be fun. You'd be surprised at how different your yard looks just by being out at different times of the day. You will see new things that you never knew were there.

Lawns of steel:

Lawns are really the biggest waste of water in the landscape. People baby their lawns and do anything they can to keep them green and happy, even if it means watering excessively. The truth is, a healthy lawn will need far less water than most people think. By keeping your lawn aerated and thatched properly, you allow water, air, and nutrients to penetrate the soil and aid growth. By watering smartly (applying water less often, but for longer periods at lower volumes), you allow water to soak in deeper, encouraging deeper roots. Deep rooted, well maintained lawns will, by default, win the neighborhood green contest. They will look better, grow better, and be less fussy about summer water than stressed lawns. And keep one thing in mind - most Western Oregon lawn grass naturally goes dormant in summer. Most people don't want to hear this, but our predominant turf varieties are cool season grasses, which puts them out of their element in summer heat. The fact is, most lawns will turn a little brown in summer, but they never fail to come back when fall comes around. By dousing them constantly, you are usually just watering more for recreation than purpose. If you start the water early enough and keep your lawn healthy in the first place, you can keep a green lawn with a minimum of water. The tendency is to ignore grass until it starts to brown, and then water constantly until the green comes back in fall. The truth is, once your lawn starts browning, it is going dormant, and probably won't come out of it totally until the weather cools down. The best approach is to accept the limitations of our turf grass, live with a little brown, and remember to try harder next year. Or take some lawn out and plant shrubs.

Mulch it!:

No, we're not talking about chipping your plants up. A good mulch can make a huge amount of difference in the effectiveness of your watering. Yes, bark is getting a little expensive, but so is water. You can also use fine compost as a mulch, and some people will use alternative things like coffee grounds or filbert shells. In some climates they use rock as a mulch, but that doesn't always work well here. The point is to put something on top of the ground that will a) act as a barrier between the soil and the air which seeks to rob it of its water and b) Hold moisture itself, conserving the water you put down. Not to mention the weeds you will suppress and the erosion it could stop.