

Efficient and Convenient Ways to Water Plants

Water is a precious resource, and for homeowners it's an expensive one, too. Since up to one half of all household water is used in the lawn and garden, it makes sense to look at efficient, effective, and convenient ways to keep plants healthy so you can enjoy a beautiful landscape and conserve water.

Water at the Right Time

You may be surprised at how much water is lost to evaporation when you water on a warm, sunny afternoon — estimates put the amount at up to 30%. The best time to water is early morning or evening. If you are using an overhead sprinkler, water in the morning so foliage can dry quickly. During drought conditions, some municipalities mandate that watering be done after dark. A programmable timer that turns water on and off at set times is especially handy in this situation.

Avoid Runoff

In addition to evaporation, water is frequently lost to runoff. If land is sloped or soil is compacted, water won't sink in but will instead drain away. Soaker hoses minimize runoff, but there are other ways to help, too. For example, create a "donut" of soil around new plants by mounding soil into a low berm around the stem or trunk. This creates a shallow bowl where the water you apply will puddle and soak in slowly, rather than running off. Once plants are established, flatten this berm so water drains away from the plant.

Water Deeply

When you water, strive to moisten the soil down to the depth of the plants' root systems. Newly seeded areas and transplants may need daily watering. But for established plants and lawns, daily light sprinklings of water can actually do more harm than good because they encourage plants to form shallow roots, which dry out quickly. Weekly deep soakings are much better for plants. Water established perennial plants so that soil is moist to a depth of at least six inches. On lawns, moisten soil to depth of at least two and preferably three inches. Dig a hole to see how deeply the water has penetrated.

Adjust Water to Plants' Needs

Some plants need more water than others to thrive. Squash, melons, and tomatoes require consistently moist soil to produce their best. Other plants, such as many native flowers, can dry out between watering with no ill effects. A rule of thumb is to apply one inch of water per week — and that includes what nature provides. The easiest way to determine this is with a rain gauge.

One simple way to determine how much water you're applying with an overhead sprinkler is to set out an empty can — a tuna or cat food can is handy because it's about an inch tall. When the can is filled an inch of water has fallen. Once you determine how long it takes your system to apply an inch of water, you can set a timer.

Amend Soil and Apply Mulch

Interestingly, adding organic matter to soil helps it absorb and retain water, while also improving its drainage. Mix in organic matter at planting time and use organic mulches, such as bark chips or pine straw; as they decompose they'll add organic matter to soil.

Make Watering Convenient

Water is vital to plants, but taking time out of a busy day to water the garden can be difficult. Set up a system that makes it easy for you. For example, run separate hoses to different parts of the garden, so you don't have to lug them around. Set up a soaker hose or sprinkler on an automated timer. Attach quick-release hose connectors and shut-off valves to avoid trips back to the tap. Use a watering wand that can be adjusted to apply a gentle shower to plants and a stronger stream to hose off containers. Use self-watering containers to prolong the time between watering. Use a decorative hose reel, bowl, or holder so you can store your hoses close to your gardens.

Water your garden wisely — you'll save water, your plants will thrive, and you'll enjoy a beautiful landscape this summer.