



Tips & Techniques: Watering

With the paltry amount of rain we've received this summer, watering the garden has been more of a regular chore than most years. In this post, we'll offer some tips on watering – how to keep your garden thriving without wasting water. Below are answers to some frequently asked questions that we receive about watering.

How often should I water my garden?

This answer changes depending on the weather! Just like with other garden maintenance, it's important to take time to observe your garden environment and your plants. Did you just plant tiny seedlings that wilt easily in the heat? Or are you tending monster tomato plants with hardy, well-established roots? If you stick your finger down into the soil, is it parched or still damp? In general, it's a good idea to *water when the ground feels dry* at a depth of an inch to an inch and a half deep. This applies to container gardens as well. If you are tending small seedlings or other vulnerable plants, keep the ground damp (not soggy) until the plants look vigorous.

How long should I water?

It's much better for a garden to receive *a long drink* than a little bit of water every day. Imagine the roots of your crops growing toward water. If there is never enough water to sink deep into the soil, the roots will stay near the soil surface, making the plant vulnerable to drought and heat stress. If the water percolates through the soil it will encourage roots downward, which makes for a more stable and drought-hardy plant.

As a general rule, wet the soil surface of your garden to prepare it to accept more water. Then water an area until puddles form. Move on to a new spot, eventually returning to the first location. Water once more, until a puddle forms. Repeat this process across the entire garden, to give each area a significant amount of water.

What time of day should I water?

The best time to water is *in the morning*. When you water, focus on soaking the ground, not the plant! Plants receive the majority of the water that they need through their roots. When you water in the morning, you are allowing any water that does end up on the plant leaves to dry quickly. This is an important consideration in terms of disease control. Plants that have wet leaves invite fungal disease. However, if you can't water in the morning, evening is the second best choice, as far as water management is concerned. Watering in the evening means more water soaks into the ground and less evaporates, compared with watering in the middle of the day. In the evening, avoid wetting plant leaves as much as possible.

What are some ways to conserve water?

- *Mulch!* Adding layers of organic matter to your garden soil keeps water from evaporating, meaning you can go longer between each watering. Start with a layer of wet newspaper or cardboard (wetting it helps keep it from blowing away as you work) to deter weeds, and then add some dried leaves, hay, or straw.
- Set up a *drip tape*. There are many drip irrigation options for home gardeners. Some of them can even be set up to run on a [gravity feed](#) – which means you can attach them to a rain barrel. Drip lines direct water right to the base of the plants, keeping water from being wasted on other areas of the garden.

- *Rain barrels* conserve water too! You can hook one up to a downspout, keeping rainwater from going into the sewer system. **Please Note** – because collected rainwater can house bacteria and other unknown substances picked up from the roof, don't use collected rainwater to water any part of the plant that you intend to eat. Also, never use collected rainwater to clean or process produce.
- As mentioned earlier, *plan your watering for morning or evening*, to minimize evaporation.

Can I water too much?

YES. Some plants like “wet feet,” but most of them are not vegetables and fruits! Unless you are growing a plant that is indigenous to a swamp, be careful not to create one in your garden! Plants need porosity in the soil, so their roots don't drown. Ironically, a plant that wilts is not only exhibiting one of the main symptoms of drought - over-watered plants wilt, too! So if your plant is wilting, before you grab the watering can, check the soil carefully to make sure it's more -not *less*- water that it needs.

And here is one more note that we should mention. We know our plants love a drink of water in the middle of summer and we do too! But the time honored tradition of slurping down some water from the hose is not necessarily a great idea. Most garden hoses are made at least partly of PVC, which contains (and leaches) lead. Brass fittings can also leach lead. Consider purchasing a [potable water drinking hose](#), for use on your veggie or herb garden. Then you can go ahead and take a sip yourself!