

WATERING WISELY

Here in the Puget Sound region, we are blessed with a mild climate that will grow everything from Douglas firs to kiwis to roses. Contrary to popular belief (and local bragging), however, we don't actually have wet weather twelve months out of the year. In fact, we may go two to three months with no rainfall to speak of. Unfortunately for our plants, this seasonal drought takes place during the season when our plants are working hardest: summer. The majority of plantings will need some summer water, and HOW you water will make a big difference to the performance—and even the survival—of your carefully chosen plants.

Water Deeply

The first rule to remember is: deep watering encourages deep roots. And deep roots mean plants that are more resistant to drought. Watering lightly on a daily basis is nearly the worst thing to do: it encourages shallow-rooted plants that might wilt the first day you miss. Worse yet, frequent shallow watering may only wet the very top layer of soil without replenishing the subsoil moisture—on a hot, slightly windy day, that top layer could dry out completely in an hour or so—leaving your poor plants bone dry an hour after being sprinkled. The best thing to do is, when you water an area, soak it slowly and completely. Soaker hoses are great for that (less water lost to evaporation), or if you use sprinklers, run them during the cooler hours, at a lower rate, for a longer time. Lawns and the majority of plants need 1-2” of water a week during hot weather; use a rain gauge or flat-sided (not sloping) container to measure how much you're actually putting out until you know how long it takes to put down that amount. Make sure that you're applying it slowly enough to let it soak in, not run off—an inch of water will do your driveway no good at all!

How Often?

How often should you water? Every day, every week, every 10.25 days . . . For those of us with nice timers, we'd love a numeric answer. Unfortunately, the real answer is: as often as you need to. How hot it is, your soil type, do you use mulch, what plants you have and how densely they're planted—all of these make a difference. In general, sandy soil holds less water than clay or soil rich in organic matter; dense plantings need more water than lightly planted areas; the more exposure to sun OR wind, the more water is needed. A fully mulched shade garden may need to be watered half as often as a sunny, crowded perennial border. A geranium pot might need to be watered twice in a day. So how to tell? Use the rule of thumb.

The Rule of Thumb

The rule of thumb is: Use your thumb. Or your finger, that's fine too. Stick it in the soil. (If you've been adding compost as you should, your thumb will go in easily.) If you've been watering too shallowly, you may feel a moist layer at the surface and a dry layer underneath—that means TROUBLE! Change your ways and water more deeply! If you've been watering deeply, the top layer of soil may be dry while the bottom layer still feels slightly wet. That's fine. When the soil dries out to about three inches deep—the length of your thumb—NOW it's time to water again. And when you're done watering, the soil should be damp all the way down.

Exceptions to the Rule of Thumb

Some plants are naturally shallow-rooted; they require water closer to the surface. If you wait until the soil dries out to the depth of your thumb, these plants may suffer. The most common shallow-rooted plants are rhododendrons, azaleas, heathers, and most bedding plants. Shallow-rooted vegetables include lettuce, other leafy greens, and onions. Anything newly-planted qualifies as well. These plants appreciate being watered as soon as the top inch dries out. If you see leaves turning dull or curling slightly, water!

Drought Tolerant Plantings and Natives

Don't assume that because a plant is drought tolerant or native to our area (and presumably adapted to waterless summers) that it won't need watering. Remember, when you plant out a transplant, it's not going to have the root spread or depth that the same size plant would have had if it had been growing in place for five years. Until it gets that root growth, it can't reach for water that might be available in the subsoil. Result? A "drought-tolerant" plant dying of thirst. Assume that almost any plant, whatever its long-term needs, will need supplemental water its first summer. Drought tolerant plants may need supplemental water in subsequent years during long dry or hot spells—always watch your plantings to see if they are looking stressed (dull or curling leaves).

Cutting Down on Water Use

How can you cut down on your water use? There are a number of things to do, depending on your garden site and on what you find appealing.

- Water during the cooler times of day to cut down dramatically on evaporation.
- Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation.
- Use a surfactant. EZ-Wet or Perc-O-Late Plus™ helps prevent run off, allows water to penetrate more deeply, and helps water "wick up" in the soil.
- Compost and mulch hold 30 to 100 times their weight in water, so dig in 3 inches of compost before planting and maintain a compost or bark mulch.
- Weeds steal water your plants need, so keep your garden **WEEDED**.
- In a vegetable garden, slightly increase your spacing so each plant has a little more area for its roots to spread out and grab the water available. Steve Solomon's book [Water Wise Gardening](#) describes how to take that principle to the extreme of almost no supplemental watering for some crops!
- For ornamental beds, remember shade gardens need less water than sunny ones—if you like trees plant a few where they'll do some good.
- If you've got a windy location, put in a windbreak to cut your moisture loss.
- Plant your new lawn, perennial border, etc. in early fall to take advantage of our returning rains.
- And by all means, do plant natives and drought-tolerant plants—we have whole lists of things suitable! Just remember to coddle them until they get established.