

Garden & Landscape Design Department

Watering Your Plants

Water is very important to the growth and survival of all plants especially those that have been recently planted or transplanted.

How should I water?

When watering it is important to be sure that you saturate the ground so water reaches the deep roots of the plants. You can do this by running water for one to two hours from an oscillating sprinkler attached to a hose or by running water from a drip hose for one to two hours. You may also water with a hand held hose, however, it takes a long time for the water to get to the deep roots and most people get bored and move on too quickly to properly benefit their new plants. This is especially true for trees with big root balls. If you are going to water with a hose, leave a slow dripping hose at the base of EACH tree or shrub root ball for about 10-15 minutes.

Irrigation systems are a good option for homeowners with limited time and/or extensive plantings, but can be costly and require an irrigation contractor to install. Simple hose bib drip irrigation systems may be a cost effective solution and can be constructed and installed by handy homeowners. Components for simple drip irrigation systems are available in the nursery.

Morning is the best time to water as there is less chance for fungal diseases, although, any time is better than not watering. It is always best to water at the base of the plants so water does not sit on leaves. Water droplets can act as a magnifying glass and possibly burn the leaves. Water on the leaves can also create a problem with fungal diseases.

How often should I water?

During the heat of the summer and in drought situations, your new planting may require watering 3 to 4 times per week. Plant roots need air, so it is a good idea to let your plants dry out in between watering so that the soil does not become waterlogged. You should cut back watering after periods with high rainfall. In our area, plantings need approximately 1" of rain a week during the active growing season.

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Watering Your Plants (Continued)

It may still be important to water plantings after a rain shower or even after a down pour because the rain water may not penetrate the mulch and/or topsoil, or be enough for the plants' requirements. Rain gauges can help homeowners monitor local rainfall. It is also important to understand your soils. Heavy clay soils hold water and have poor drainage. They will need to be watered less frequently than soils with high sand content and better drainage. As plantings mature and their root systems get established (usually three years after initially planting) your plants will require less manual watering. Some perennials and annuals may always need supplemental watering.

How do I know if my plants are getting enough water?

Although there are soil moisture meters that are available for purchase in the nursery, the best way to check if it is time to water is pretty low-tech and hopefully always with you... your finger! Simply pull back the mulch in an area around the base of a plant and insert your finger into the soil. If the soil is too dry, it will be hard to push your finger in, feel dry and dusty and leave a dry dust on your finger. This means it is time to water! If the soil feels soupy, mushy or muddy and coats your finger with mud, the soil is too saturated and it is a good idea to delay watering for a few days to allow the soil to dry out a bit. When soils are too wet, it is a good idea to test again in a few days, before watering. Ideal moisture levels, will feel somewhere in the middle, damp and slightly spongy...kind of like a brownie or piece of chocolate cake! And similar to testing the doneness of a cake with a toothpick, soil at the right moisture level, shouldn't leave too much soil on your testing finger. Another way to gage if your plants need water is a visual assessment of the plant's leaves. It is typical for plants that are feeling water stress to droop and start to shrivel. Dry, brown or crispy leaves are usually a sign of severe water stress. Alternatively, yellowing of leaves, particularly for broad leaf evergreens like hollies and boxwood, can be an indication of too much water.

You might be surprised to know that people kill plants as often by overwatering as under watering! Many homeowners see a plant suffering and immediately assume it may need watering, overwaters and ends up killing the plant with good intentions. This is why it is important to test and monitor the soil moisture around your plants before immediately adding more water.