

# The art of water-wise gardening

By Melinda Myers

Making a few changes in your garden care can yield great benefits. Less time and water wasted means more time for you to relax or entertain friends and family in your beautiful landscape. Water is critical throughout the life of a plant, but deciding when and how much water to provide each plant can be a bit overwhelming. Make this task easier and conserve moisture with these simple strategies.

Start by matching plants to your growing conditions. Selecting plants suited to your climate, soil moisture and average rainfall means healthier, better-looking plants and productive gardens with less supplemental water.



Drip irrigation systems allow you to slowly apply water right above the plant roots, encouraging the development of deep, drought-tolerant roots.

Photo/Gardener's Supply Company

Incorporate organic matter such as compost into the soil prior

to planting. This helps the soil more efficiently absorb rainfall and irrigation water. Less runoff means less water wasted. Adding organic matter also increases the ability of fast-draining soil to hold moisture, extending the time between watering.

Mulch the soil with organic materials such as shredded leaves, evergreen needles or woodchips. Mulching helps conserve moisture while suppressing weeds and improving the soil as it decomposes. Plus, you'll be recycling landscape trimmings back into the landscape and the environment. It's green gardening.

There will still be times you need to lend nature a hand. Sprouting seeds, young seedlings and new transplants need consistent moisture to grow and establish a root system. Most annual flowers and vegetables also need consistent moisture throughout the season.

Newly planted perennials, trees and shrubs also need more attention and water than established plants with deeper roots able to absorb more moisture. During extended dry periods, even established plants will need supplemental water.

Providing the right amount of water at the right time can be a challenge. Doing it efficiently to avoid wasting time or water can help ensure your gardening success.

Take the guess work out of watering with a drip irrigation system. Drip irrigation systems allow you to apply water to the soil right above the plant roots, exactly where it's needed.

Run a line next to each row of plants – or every 18 inch in planting beds. The water slowly seeps through the holes and into the soil below. The slow, steady flow moistens the root zone, encouraging the development of deep, drought-tolerant roots.

Just turn on the faucet, set the timer and let the irrigation

system do the work. This reduces the risk of frequent, ineffective watering which leads to shallow roots growing just below the soil surface where they dry out quickly. High temperatures or missed irrigation can stress shallow rooted plants, reducing their beauty and productivity.

The use of appropriate irrigation, mulching and organic matter can make a huge difference in the quality of your landscape – and your enjoyment of your garden.

*Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including "Small Space Gardening." She hosts The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything" DVD series and the nationally syndicated "Melinda's Garden Moment" TV and radio segments.*