

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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In western Washington, we are blessed with ample rain in winter and scant precipitation in summer. For those of you who don't want to spend your summers watering your gardens, there are strategies to keep your water needs to a minimum.

When selecting a site for your garden, pay attention to wind. Moving air removes moisture from leaf surfaces. The more protected the site, the less water your plants will need.

Soil is key. Dig compost or other organic matter 12 to 16 inches into your flowering beds. For clay soils, add 3 inches of compost for new gardens and for sandy soils, add 2 inches. Organic matter binds clay in clumps, creating air spaces so rain can penetrate the soil instead of puddling on the surface. In summer, rain will make its way more easily to plant-root level, and in winter, the excess moisture will drain away more efficiently. This is important because many drought-tolerant plants do not appreciate soggy winter soil. Adding organic matter to sandy soils increases water retention year round, giving plant roots a chance to suck rainwater up, before it disappears out of reach.

To minimize the need for summer watering, look for plants that have evolved in dry summer conditions. Try local native plants or plants from other parts of the world that have dry-summer climates similar to ours, such as Turkey (Bloody cranesbill, *Geranium sanguineum*; rusty foxglove, *Digitalis ferruginea*), the Mediterranean (strawberry trees, *Arbutus unedo*; rock roses, *Cistus*), the southwestern Cape District in South Africa (Cape fuchsia, *Phygelius*), and the west coasts of North and South America (California lilac, *Ceanothus*; manzanita, *Arctostaphylos*; and sumac, *Rhus*).

Alternatively, look for plants that do most of their growing when water is abundant and go dormant when the weather gets dry. Examples are spring-flowering bulbs, such as crocus and tulip; the early-flowering shrubs such as red-flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*); and Italian arum (*Arum italicum*), a dramatically leaved perennial that vanishes in the summer.

Leaves are the most obvious indicator of the water-holding capacity of many plants. Fleshy leaves, such as those of stonecrop (*Sedum*) and hen and chicks (*Sempervivum*) store water. Small leaves, such as those of sweet box (*Sarcococca hookerana humilis*) and cotoneaster, minimize evaporation.

Look for waxy leaves (aucuba; Japanese holly, *Ilex crenata*); hairy leaves (lamb's ears, *Stachys*); gray-green leaves (artemisia; lavender); blue-tinted leaves (blue Atlas cedar, *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauc'; *Hebe glauca*); and prickly leaves (sea holly, *Eryngium*), all of which indicate drought tolerance.

To ensure your plants make the most of the rain, put down a mulch to reduce evaporation and to smother water-snatching weeds. For flowerbeds, use 1 to 3 inches of leaves, compost, or grass clippings, all of which have the added benefit of feeding plants quickly without tying up nutrients. To prevent plants from rotting, keep the mulch 1 inch away from the stems. For trees, shrubs, and woody perennials, use 2 to 4 inches of woody mulches, like wood chips, bark, or fall leaves, which will last for a year or more and provide a steady supply of nutrients for plant growth.

Frequent light watering encourages plants to put down shallow roots, which makes them more likely to dry out. If you do water, allow the soil to dry out between waterings and add water only when the plants look as though they need it. Water in the cool of the early morning, when there will be less evaporation, and water slowly to prevent run-off—about one-half inch per hour. To check how much you're watering, place small cans in the area and check the water level in the cans after 15 minutes. To check if you've watered deep enough, dig down 6 inches or more an hour or two after watering to make sure the root zone is damp.

Where possible, use drip irrigation or soaker hoses, rather than sprinklers, so less water will be wasted. It's okay to put your soaker hoses under your mulch, where the water will be that much closer to plant roots. And remember, newly planted plants, even if they are drought-tolerant, will require regular watering until they become established.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.