

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: August 1, 2004
Contact: WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension: 428-4270

Here are some special tips for watering your garden this summer:

If you are having a problem with dry, hard soil where the water just runs off the top rather than absorbing downward, try covering the soil with organic mulch. The mulch acts as a sponge and slowly releases it to deeper levels below. Adding mulch also works wonders to loosen compacted soil, plus it helps prevent drying out of the soil below.

When watering those hanging baskets try using ice cubes instead. The ice gives the soil time to absorb the water so it doesn't just run out the bottom of the pot.

Group your plants by their watering needs. Plants that need full sun or need to be in well-drained soil do not require as much water as astilbe, and irises for example. This way you can water only the plants that need it when they need it and save time and energy and most of all save water. Silver, gray or hairy foliage are sometimes a good indication that a plant is drought tolerant.

Protect your hose from weed-eaters and lawn mowers, roll them up and remove them from the area you are going to mow or weed eat. With a leaky hose you can actually lose up to 700 gallons of water a day. What a waste that would be.

Choose the right watering system. Soaker hoses and drip systems are great for getting water directly to the roots of plants. Sprinklers are really only good for lawns and small kids. Remember a 100 foot drip hose will use about 60 gallons an hour whereas a sprinkler can use up to 480 gallons in that same hour.

The time of day you water is also important. Water in the early morning. By watering early you will save water and it cuts down on the risk of fungal diseases. The fungus doesn't get much time to grow in your wet soil before Mr. Sun heats them to death. Watering in the evening gives the fungal diseases a chance to develop during the night and cause problems.

Let your lawn turn brown. It should turn green again as soon as it gets rain. Fescue needs less watering and can go dormant during the hot summer month. Don't water on windy days, wind increases evaporation and you lose a lot of water. Wait for a calm day. Keep your grass about 3 inches high. Higher grass (3inches) keeps that water loss to a minimum and keeps the ground a bit shaded. If you have an aquarium, remember that water is rich in phosphorus and nitrogen. Plants need this so use it when you clean out the tank and give those plants a real treat. This is a win/win situation. Clean water for your fish and an energy drink for your plants.

In hot weather you will need to water hanging pots and container plants every day because they dry out so fast. Finally we have found that using an inexpensive kiddie pool with about 1 inch of water in it is great for bottom watering a lot of plants at the same time. Use water wisely and enjoy the fruits of your gardening.

The information provided in this newsrelease is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

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, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.