

Vacation Time and Watering Containers

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September 6, 2019



Ways to “waterproof” your container plants

You’ve decided to pack up the SUV, take the dog, (don’t forget the kids), and get started on your way for a fun-filled vacation. Some things do need to be done before you actually leave. Have you thought about how your container plants will survive while you are gone? If you are going for the weekend, things should be fine with some extra water the day before you leave. If, however, you are going to be gone for a 10-day vacation or longer, you need a more comprehensive strategy.

Consider these points to keep your plants adequately watered:

- Water deeper and infrequently rather than a small amount more frequently.
- Don’t water on a set schedule. Rather, check the soil every few days to see if the area needs water. Depending on the plants, different containers will have different needs.
- Darker soil means wetter soil, while lighter color means drier soil.
- Watering early in the morning is best. The evening is 2nd best, with midday being the worst time.
- Native plants are best suited to your area and require less water than introduced plants.
- Get rid of those weeds that steal water from your gorgeous plants.
- Don’t plant anything new for at least 6 weeks prior to your departure.
- Water plants thoroughly before you leave by soaking pots and hanging baskets in a bucket of water to ensure that moisture penetrates to the center of the pot.

You can “waterproof” your container plants in many ways. These include: “No cost,” “low cost,” “moderate cost,” or “more expensive.” The decision is yours. A no cost option would be to find someone to water while you are gone.

Another no cost option would be to move as many pots and hanging baskets as feasible to an afternoon shady spot and group by water needs. This helps create a more humid environment and makes for easier watering.

Another possibility is to consider sinking small pots into the ground to cut down on water loss by keeping the roots cool.

A low cost solution for container plants is an easy “wicking system” that works indoors or out. This requires some sort of absorbent wicking material (strips of a cotton or t-shirt) and a container (bottle, bowl or pail) to hold water. Place the container next to the plant. (A large bucket may water several plants.) Place one end

of the wick into the water and secure the other end about three inches deep into the plant's moist soil. As the soil dries out, water will travel from the wick ensuring your plant is watered as needed. Ensure that your wicking setup works correctly several weeks in advance so that you can make adjustments accordingly.



Bark is frequently used as a mulch, especially in landscaping and yards, but it should not be incorporated into the soil, because it is very hard to break down. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Mulching is another option. Mulch materials may be organic (shredded leaves, bark, straw) or inorganic (gravel) and placed around plants will reduce evaporation and water runoff. Mulch also improves water penetration into the root zone and limits weed growth that also competes for water. Depending on your source of mulch, the cost could be low, moderate or high.

Another moderate cost option is self-watering planter pots that contain a water reservoir. Kits are available to change most pots to a self-watering. The smaller the pot, the more frequently you will have to water.

The more expensive options include row covers, drip watering systems or smart phone apps for built-in irrigation systems. In windy locations, row covering material will reduce moisture loss to plants

If you have lots of container plantings a drip watering system with an automatic timer is an efficient solution. This works while you are away and when you are home. They are simple to assemble and require no special tools other than a punch.. You can arrange them to fit your garden's layout or containers' needs.

A smartphone app for built-in irrigation systems gives you access to the system wherever you are. This set up is probably best handled by a professional with appropriate credentials.

A Word to The Wise: Don't plant something new within the preceding 4-6 weeks before your departure date. Always soak everything well the day before you leave. You want the water to soak in at least 6 inches deep. An easy way to check moisture depth is to dig a small hole and check to see how wet the soil is at varying levels of depth.

Enjoy your vacation and don't worry about your container plants!



Top Left: Drip systems can be set up in pots or in gardens. **Top Right:** Automatic watering systems are easy to install. This one is connected to a drip hose and is set to water for just 10 minutes a day. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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