
Smart Watering Practices

You might prefer an easily communicated time schedule of watering frequencies, but the reality is that site drainage, soil structure, temperature, sun and wind exposure and the time of year are all variables of this critical maintenance task. Excessive fluctuation in soil moisture can negatively impact plants. It's even possible to over irrigate in the desert! Observation of your plants and soil is the only way to water wisely. (Chapter 5 discusses several irrigation methods.)



Frequent, gentle waterings are needed to germinate seeds. Maintain moist (not wet) soil in the top two to three inches, which also helps prevent a surface “crust” from forming, allowing seedlings to more easily emerge. After your sprouts emerge, waterings become less frequent but deeper to match the enlarging root zone and to leach salts. Your goal is to keep at least the top foot moist. Use a ruler to measure periodically in the early morning, which is also the best time to irrigate to prevent the growth or spread of waterborne disease or pests. If the soil is dry down to one inch, then water the garden.

After seedlings are established, allow the soil to just barely dry out between slow, deep waterings. This encourages strong root development and allows for aeration in the soil. Remember, it is possible to drown or rot your plants when overwatering in clay soils; roots also need oxygen.

In general, larger plants will use more water than smaller ones. Plants with deep roots are watered less often than shallow-rooted ones. More water is needed in the heat of the summer or during drying winds. Clay and silt soils will retain water longer than sandy soil.



Wilt is often a sign of water deprivation, but take care when examining large, leafy plants such as squash, zucchini and sweet potatoes which “overreact” during summer afternoons. If they recover the following morning and the soil seems moist based on the above rule, hold the water. Learn to tolerate summer heat stress in your garden. Most plants will not look their finest in August, but if you allow the plants to develop some coping capacity you will minimize your watering chores.



TIP

Be specific with your students. They are watering the soil, not the plants. Many's the time we've observed youngsters softly showering foliage, with negligible soil impact and the possibility of vegetative salt burn or the spread of fungal disease.

