Waterwise Garden & Lawn Care

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Enjoy a healthy garden or lawn while conserving water.

Our region is renowned for gray, rainy skies, but in summer we usually get less rainfall than Tucson, Arizona! This month, area reservoirs are at their lowest, while demand for irrigation water peaks. Dry gardens cry out for a long drink of water, but you want to conserve that precious liquid. What's a gardener to do?

- Choose drought-tolerant plants
- Mulch vegetables, flowers, shrubs and trees
- Build rich soil that holds water
- Water wisely
- Reduce the size of your lawn or convert it to a water-wise landscape

Lawns are almost always the biggest water guzzlers in your yard. Do you actually use all that grass or does it use hours of your time for mowing, watering and raking? How many croquet games or football tournaments have you hosted in the past few years? This is a good time to map out the areas of your lawn that you actually use, then make plans to convert the rest to water-wise vegetable, flowers, shrubs or trees.

LET YOUR YARD GO NATIVE

Consider using plants that are native to western Washington. Use drought-tolerant native plants such as the evergreen groundcover with the delightful name of Kinnikinnick, or the Red-Osier Dogwood, a shrub with gleaming red branches that light up the winter landscape.

For that remaining patch of lawn, mow it to a height of 1-1/2 to 2 inches. Long blades or grass shade the soil and encourage deeper root growth. The deeper the roots, the more drought-tolerant your lawn will be. Leave the lawn clippings on the grass - they help retain moisture and provide the lawn with nutrients. You can purchase a mulching mower, but if you mow often, the clippings left by your regular mower will break down effectively.

Allow your lawn to dry out between watering. You will know when your grass needs water because it will not spring back up when you walk on it. One inch of water per week (including rainfall) should be sufficient for a green lawn throughout the summer. To help water and oxygen penetrate down to the grass roots, aerate your lawn when the soil is moist and leave the soil cores on the surface to decompose. Water early in the morning before the sun comes up or late in the evening, so more water gets to the roots instead of evaporating during the heat of the day.

Don't try this at home! Watering your driveway will not make it grow; you'll just waste this precious resource and look foolish. Photo by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

A tan lawn in late summer is fine with many people. If the rest of the landscape is lively and interesting, a lawn that fades from pale green to tan in spots provides a neutral backdrop. If you don't live on a golf course, your yard doesn't need to look like one.

When watering, be sure your sprinkler is set to cover only the lawn, not your driveway, sidewalk, the street, the neighbor's car, etc. Even if you want a larger driveway, watering will not make it grow. Only the size of your water bill will increase.

HOW MUCH WATER?

Gardeners often fluctuate between under-watering from neglect, then over-watering in a panic. How much water is enough? What is the most efficient way to irrigate? First, check the soil moisture. Dig a hole in the garden 5-7 inches deep, grab a handful of soil. Squeeze. If water drips out, it's wet enough. Toss the ball 6 inches into the air and let it drop into your hand. If it falls apart, it needs water.

SPRINKLER, DRIP IRRIGATION, SOAKER HOSE OR COFFEE CAN?

Sprinklers are the least efficient way to apply water to a garden. Up to 30% of the water flying out from a sprinkler will evaporate before hitting the ground and moistening the surface is not the goal. Your thirsty plant needs water down at the roots. A soaker hose or drip irrigation system directs water right where it's needed and works well for rows of plants. Establishing a drip irrigation system is an investment of time and money, but it can reduce your water usage by 20 – 50%. It's certainly a better investment than many stocks.

Drip irrigation is the most efficient way to water your garden. Photo by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

What about those huge squash plants growing from well-spaced mounds instead of tight rows or those thirsty tomato plants? Try this low-tech method: punch holes in the bottoms of juice or coffee cans, then push the cans 6 to 12 inches into the soil. Fill the cans with water, which will now seep into the soil right near the plant's roots.

WATER DEEPLY BUT NOT TOO OFTEN – AND MULCH, MULCH, MULCH!
It's tempting, but not necessarily efficient, to water every day. Irrigate plants infrequently and deeply, especially before and during drought. This encourages plants to send their roots deep into the soil, where they are less likely to dry out. The goal is to saturate the area to a depth of 8 to 10 inches, much deeper than the typical holding-the-hose-while-talking-to-the-neighbor watering provides. Just because the soil surface is wet, the plant is not really watered!

Mulch is a busy gardener's best friend and makes watering much more effective. It helps soil stay cool and moist, giving plant roots a chance to soak up water, instead of evaporating from bare soil. A thick layer of mulch suppresses weed growth, a real benefit unless you're fond of hoeing and pulling weeds all summer. Pile three to four inches of well-rotted compost, straw, sawdust, leaves or even grass clippings along rows of vegetables, in flower beds, around shrubs and trees. At the end of the growing season, dig the mulch into the soil to decompose and add organic matter. Soil rich in organic material holds more water and nutrients.

Water wisely (deeply and infrequently,) mulch generously, and enjoy your summer garden.

Wise watering resources:

- Visit the Water-Wise area in the Washington Stage University Discovery Garden located at the WSU – Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center on 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway). Visiting the Discovery Garden is free and open year-round from dawn to dusk.
- Selecting water-wise plants: http://gardening.wsu.edu/text/nwnative.htm
- Selecting native plants: http://gardening.wsu.edu/nwnative/
- Choosing water-wise grass varieties: http://gardening.wsu.edu/text/faqlawn.htm#grass%20seed ; http://gardening.wsu.edu/text/lawns.htm
- Using less water in your yard: www.savingwater.org ; www.epa.gov/WaterSense/pubs/outdoor.htm
- 'Natural Yard Care,' Spanish language edition: El cuidado natural del jardin www.seattle.gov/util/stellent/groups/public/@spu/@csb/documents/webcontent/spu01_002254.pdf

Important facts to remember:

- Most plants in most areas in Washington need water in the summer.
- Frequent, shallow watering leads to shallow roots. Shallow roots lead to more rapid stress under drought or hot conditions.
- It is more efficient to water at night or in the very early morning, when evaporation is low.
- Too much water is as bad as, or worse than, too little. Rate of water application should be no more rapid than the rate at which the soil can absorb it.
- Fertilizer spread around plants is totally ineffective unless it is dissolved in water. Fertilizers must be watered in and soils have to be moist for plants to benefit.
- Conserve water where possible.

Source: 'Drought Advisory' WSU Extension Bulletin 1090 http://pnwmg.org/pdf/mgwatering.pdf

Wise watering tips:

Some experts estimate that up to 50 percent of commercial and residential irrigation water use goes to waste due to evaporation, wind, improper system design, or overwatering.

Following are some common outdoor water inefficiencies, but there are simple solutions to reduce water waste and produce great results:

- Many people water their lawns too often and for too long, over saturating plants. It's usually not necessary to water grass every day. Instead, test your lawn by stepping on a patch of grass; if it springs back, it doesn't need water.
- Converting to a water-efficient landscape through proper choice of plants and careful design can reduce outdoor water use by 20 to 50 percent.
- If homeowners with irrigation systems hired WaterSense irrigation partners (www.epa.gov/watersense) to perform regular maintenance, each household could reduce irrigation water by 15 percent or about 9,000 gallons annually—or the amount of water that would flow from a garden hose nonstop for nearly a whole day.

Source: US Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov/WaterSense/pubs/outdoor.htm