

Here in the Puget Sound region, we are blessed with a mild climate that will grow everything from Douglas firs to kiwis to roses. Contrary to popular belief (and local bragging), however, we don't actually have wet weather twelve months out of the year. In fact, we may go two to three months with no rainfall to speak of. Unfortunately for our plants, this seasonal drought takes place during the season when our plants are working their hardest: summer. The majority of plantings will need summer water, and HOW you water will make a big difference to the performance—and even the survival—of your carefully chosen plants.

Water Deeply

The first rule to remember is: deep watering encourages deep roots. And deep roots mean plants that are more resistant to drought. Watering lightly on a daily basis is nearly the worst thing to do; it encourages shallow-rooted plants that might wilt the first day you miss. Worse yet, frequent shallow watering may only wet the very top layer of soil without replenishing the subsoil moisture—on a hot, slightly windy day, that top layer could dry out completely in an hour or so—leaving your poor plants bone dry an hour after being sprinkled.

The best practice is to water slowly and completely. Use your thumb or finger (The Rule of Thumb) to check the water depth. If you've been watering too shallowly, you may feel a moist layer at the surface and a dry layer underneath. If you've been watering deeply, the top layer of soil may be dry while the bottom layer still feels slightly wet. That's fine. When the soil dries out to about three inches deep—the length of your thumb—NOW it's time to water again. When you're done watering, the soil should be damp all the way down.

Soaker hoses or drip irrigation systems are great for this, because less water is lost to evaporation. Watering during the cool of the day also reduces evaporation loss. If you use sprinklers, run them during the cooler hours, at a lower rate, for a longer time. Lawns and the majority of plants need 1-2" of water a week during hot weather; use a rain gauge or flat-sided (not sloping) container to measure how much you're actually putting out. Make sure you're watering slowly enough to let it soak in and not run off.

How Often?

Heat, wind and soil types all effect how frequently you need to water. As does, if you mulch, the type of plants you have and how densely they're planted. In general, sandy soil holds less water than clay or soil rich in organic matter; dense plantings need more water than lightly planted areas; the more exposure to sun or wind, the more water is needed. A container exposed to sun and wind might need to be watered twice in a day. How to tell? Use your finger to check.

Exceptions to the Rule of Thumb

Some plants are naturally shallow-rooted; they require water closer to the surface. If you wait until the soil dries out to the depth of your thumb, these plants may suffer. The most common shallow-rooted plants are rhododendrons, azaleas, heathers, and most bedding plants. Shallow-rooted vegetables include lettuce, other leafy greens, and onions. Anything newly-planted qualifies as well. These plants appreciate being watered as soon as the top inch dries out. If you see leaves on a plant turning dull or curling or drooping slightly, water it! Don't wait until the plant is crisp!

Drought Tolerant Plantings and Natives

Don't assume that because a plant is labeled as drought tolerant or is native to our region (and presumably adapted to waterless summers) that it won't need watering. Remember, when you put in a new plant, it's not going to have the root spread or depth that the same size plant would have had if it had been growing in place for five years. Until it gets that root growth, it can't reach for water that might be available in the subsoil. Assume that almost any plant, whatever its long-term needs, will need supplemental water its first summer. Drought tolerant plants may also need supplemental water in subsequent years during very long dry or hot spells—always watch your plantings to see if they are looking stressed. Also, assume that all plants in containers, however drought-tolerant, will need supplemental water.

Weed and Mulch!

Weeds don't just look bad—they steal water from your plants! Mulches not only help suppress weed seed germination, they also reduce surface evaporation of your soil's moisture. Bark or compost mulches absorb and hold water for your plants' later use. Similarly, organic matter in your garden soil acts like a sponge, absorbing water when it's abundant and releasing it when plants need it.

Water Conserving Products:

- Rain barrels
- Drip irrigation systems
- Soaker hoses
- Treegator® water bags
- Plant nannies for containers
- Moisture meters
- Water timers
- Soil Moist water-holding polymer (especially good for containers)
- Mycorrhizal inoculant (increases root growth so plants scavenge water more effectively):
- EZ-Wet or Hydretain surfactant (prevents water run off by allowing water to penetrate more deeply—good if you're watering an area that's gotten so dry it won't absorb water)