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Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

SUMMERTIME WATERING WISDOM

By Annie Spiegelman

Way back when, before parenthood hit me oops-upside-my-head, and I had plenty of that elusive thing called TIME, I used to water my garden with a hose, happily walking around and stopping at each plant to give them each a little positive thinking tête-à-tête. Then I found the soaker hose and my life changed. Soon after came the drip system and soon after that, came the timer that turns on the drip system while you sleep! At first I fought the idea of a timer going off watering my plants mostly because it was my husband Bill's idea. (*I think one is past the statute of limitations, of having to say "you were right," after five years have passed. Right?*) Well, the timer rules! The water goes on early in the morning or in the evening just like magic! But don't forget to take frequent nature walks around your yard to see what plant or small area needs attention, weeding, staking, or fertilizing.

A soaker hose has tiny holes where water seeps through consistently. You can place it under or above your mulch and let it zigzag through your flowerbed.



A drip system is a long length of tubing made of polyethylene with drip emitters attached to water only where plants are growing. They're easy to put together, sort of like Tinker Toys for grown-ups. You can also add low-flow misters, mini-sprayers and mini-sprinklers. A drip system is the most water-conserving method there is and the slow delivery of water over an extended length of time prevents run-off on clay soils and keeps sandy soil from drying out. Every May, I turn on my drip timer and walk around to each emitter to make sure there are no clogged emitters, lost emitters or holes anywhere in the line that will waste water. This is a good time to also check on your sprinkler system to make sure you're not watering pathways, sidewalks and streets.

If I catch my neighbors wasting water with their sprinklers collecting puddles into the street, I leave them little heart-shaped notes with statistics about the fact that 97% of the planet's water is salt water, 2% is locked in ice caps and glaciers and only 1% is fresh water available for living things. I swear, they run when they see me coming . . .

A hose-end sprinkler is good for watering seedbeds but it's best to switch to a soaker hose or drip line as plants grow. Watering with a sprinkler wets the plants leaves, which makes many plants more susceptible to diseases, encourages slugs and snails, and wastes water.

My watering philosophy is to water deeply and infrequently (unless you are watering a seedbed which must be misted briefly and frequently.) Watering deep and slowly is best because it encourages deep roots and lessens water runoff. Most agree that the best time to water is in the morning especially if you are using a lawn sprinkler. (If possible, avoid watering on windy days to lessen evaporation.) AM watering gives the plants plenty of time to dry off before dark when they could become more susceptible to diseases and

because the cooler morning temperature causes less evaporation. (If you water with a drip system or soaker hose you can water in the evening as well. This is also a good low evaporation time.)

For lawns, it's wise to water till the soil is wet 3-4 inches down. The lawn will be healthier. You can test this by watering for 15-20 minutes and then push a shovel into the soil and tilt it forward. If it's still not wet 3-4 inches down, add more water but keep track of your watering time. Lawns are my least favorite part and the thirstiest parts of landscapes. They're hogs, I tell you! Try drought tolerant grasses like tall fescue or some ground covers (wooly yarrow, caraway-scented thyme, mother of thyme, garden chamomile) that will accept occasional foot traffic.

Digging plenty of organic matter into the soil when you plant and adding a blanket of mulch to hold in the moisture will also help you water wisely. This will also lessen the chance of you finding another dead perennial, which you purchased a week before. You most probably didn't work the soil enough, and well, summer is the worst time to be planting new plants! In our Mediterranean climate, it's best to wait till fall. If you **MUST** plant in the dry summer weather, it's best to purchase native plants and drought tolerant ones. The first year you will need to water them consistently. But after that, you hardly look at them, and they grow and bloom enthusiastically. Your local nursery can help you find drought tolerant plants and natives in your area.