

Water conservation ideas for the home vegetable garden

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Q. I grow vegetables for my family, but I know we are in a severe drought. How can I use less water and grow tasty vegetables in my garden?

A. Now is the time to implement water-wise strategies that save water while still producing a bountiful harvest.

Prepare the soil by removing all weeds by the roots and amending the soil with organic matter, thereby, increasing the water holding capacity. Improving soil nutrition can increase yields without increasing water needs. Next add a heavy layer of mulch. Well mulched soil will retain moisture longer.

Consider a new planting strategy. Try planting in blocks rather than single rows to shade plant roots and reduce evaporation. Group plants with similar water needs to irrigate more efficiently. Plant reliable varieties that have produced well for you before; or, you simply plant less to save additional water.

Irrigation strategies are critical to the overall goal of water conservation. It's best to water during early mornings when the wind is calm and temperatures are cool. But most importantly, do heed any city guidelines set forth in your area. A soaker hose is the least expensive and is easy to use. Drip or trickle irrigation on timers is ideal and can reduce water usage by 50%! Either way, remember to place irrigation hoses below the mulch to further reduce evaporation and make sure your plants have easy access to this precious resource. Check soil moisture regularly to avoid over watering. Dig down below the mulch to evaluate soil moisture. Squeeze a handful of soil in your hand. If it holds its shape, additional irrigation can be delayed. If the soil is dry to a depth of 4-6 inches, it's time to water.

In depth drought information resources are available at the UCCE San Luis Obispo County website:

http://cesanluisobispo.ucanr.edu/Drought_Information/Vegetable_Gardens/

Please join us for a "How to Build a Raised Bed Workshop" on Thursday March 20 at 4:00 p.m. in our demonstration garden at 2156 Sierra Way, San Luis Obispo. A raised bed can be water efficient whether planted with vegetables or drought tolerant plants. The workshop will be about an hour and building plans will be provided.