

Summer officially arrived two weeks ago and with it, warmer weather. As the summer heat escalates, watering always becomes a major issue.

I recently read an article by The National Garden Association which stated the following facts about plants and water:

- All seeds need even moisture during germination.
- Beans need more water when they're flowering.
- Sweet corn needs more water during silk, tassel and ear development.
- Watermelon needs more water during fruit set and growth.
- Tomatoes need consistent amounts of water to prevent blossom end rot.

Everyone knows water is essential for life. Plants need water, and although the act of watering may seem to be one of the simplest gardening practices, a few rational steps should be followed. There is more to watering than simply turning on the hydrant. To use water wisely and keep your garden and landscape looking great, please consider the following watering tips.

When is the best time to water? Although one can water anytime, the best time is in the morning. Whether one is watering the lawn or the vegetable garden, early morning is ideal. Morning watering is preferred for two reasons: 1) less water evaporates, and 2) there is no chance of overnight dampness on the leaves, a condition which can readily cause or spread disease.

How frequently should one water? Whether watering the lawn or the vegetable garden, infrequent and deep watering is better than watering frequently. A deep watering for plants helps them establish stronger roots which, in turn, creates a more durable and hardy plant .

How much to water is where it gets complicated. When people ask me how much to water, sometimes I have been guilty of responding, "Water enough, but not too much." As unintelligent as that statement may sound, the fact is, no one can precisely determine how much water plants need. It all depends on one's soil type, the air temperature, wind, species of plant, age of the plant, and whether it is growing in the ground or growing in a container. Even the type and size of a container makes a difference in determining how much water is needed.

A general rule of thumb is most plants will perform best if they receive at least one inch of water per week. If Mother Nature delivers it in the form of rain, great; otherwise, it is up to the gardener. Even then, if one's soil is sandy or silt-like, the plants will likely need more than one inch per week. Furthermore, if temperatures quickly spike, more than one inch of water will probably be needed. I strongly encourage all gardeners to own a rain gauge. Although simple in design, a rain gauge can accurately determine how much precipitation Mother Nature has delivered.

Lastly, the technique that one chooses to apply water should be considered. An automatic sprinkling system or manual sprinkling system is acceptable when watering turf. Overhead watering of turf grass is not harmful as long as one pays close attention to the timing of the application and the amount of water applied.

When it comes to watering a vegetable garden, overhead sprinkling is not the preferred method. The best technique for watering a vegetable garden is to apply the water directly to the soil and root area— not on the leaves of the plant. This can be accomplished with an automatic drip irrigation system or one that is manually controlled as with soaker hoses. If watering a vegetable garden from overhead, little benefit, if any, is achieved by wetting the leaves. All too often wet leaves can cause and promote the spread of disease. An excellent way to conserve water is to water only the root area. Irrigating the entire garden is a waste of water and merely encourages weeds to grow. Although drip irrigation or soaker hoses are the preferred method to water a garden; keep in mind, if the system is set on an automatic timer, one should monitor it closely. Allowing an automatic system to operate following a good soaking rain can easily result in overwatering and definitely wastes water.

Enjoy the heat of summer, but remember— water is a precious resource. Don't waste it.