

This Week in Your Garden / Mary Robson

Keep plants going without a bank-breaking water bill

August. We humans seek out water now, looking for lakes to jump in, pools to cool our feet in, and large glasses, with ice clinking, to sip from. Likewise, water keeps the garden thriving, and I happily imagine the parade of roses, hostas and delphiniums jostling each other by the spigot, taking deep afternoon drinks.

Unfortunately, plants can't collect their own water. Rainfall this month might be barely enough to dampen a leaf before the sun burns it dry. So plants must depend on gardeners between now and early October, when we hope for the return of fall rains. Here now are some tips on how to preserve your plants this season, while at the same time making sure not to waste water:

Visualize your plants' root systems. A one-gallon-pot plant has 6-inch-deep roots that need soaking once a week. I've formed "wells" around all my plants, with a rim at least 3 inches high to hold water in as it seeps to the roots. Fill the well, let it drain and fill it again, once a week. When I head out to hose-water my small garden by hand, I take along a small mattock to scoop up soil and repair any edge that might allow run-off.

Check your garden's irrigation system. Measure the depth of water penetration with a trowel to be sure it reaches full root depth. If you need to adjust an irrigation system (or install one), get professional assistance. A well-designed irrigation system preserves the beauty of the landscape and reduces the garden maintenance. The aim of good irrigation is to supply water carefully and slowly to the roots. Check www.savingwater.org for more information about irrigation systems.

Water only your plants. Weed seeds germinate at the slightest touch of water, so keeping the water within the plant-root area helps reduce weeds. Thanks to an unfortunate pollutant — pasture grass in last year's mulch — I have about 12 trillion seeds just waiting for water.

Consider a leaky-pipe hose system. Many gardeners do well with these pipe hoses made of recycled rubber. Before use, they resemble a giant rubber slinky, bouncing and curled. So it's best to put them on a driveway in the sun until they're warm and pliable. After that, the rubber will straighten and stretch through beds more easily. Lay the hoses throughout the garden, about 18 inches apart. Pin them down with wire or hold them down with bricks until they conform to the ground, then cover them with 2-3 inches of mulch.

Save some house water for your gardens. Essentially, any gallon of water you can capture and carry out is a gallon you've already bought. Collect water from washing vegetables or starting the shower into 2-gallon plastic watering cans and plastic buckets. You won't save many gallons, but you will develop an appreciation for water's value.

Check container plants carefully. On my deck, a suffering pattypan squash wouldn't accept water. The water just poured out the container drain hole, because the roots were bound at the bottom and rejected the water. A better idea would have been to set a water-filled wheelbarrow beside the container plants, then stand them into the water to hydrate from the bottom up. For plants in containers, it can make the difference between life and death.

Enjoy browsing in nurseries now to select drought-resistant plants for fall installation. My current rave is low-growing prostrate rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus'), which ambles happily over mulch and rocks in even the most exposed spots, nearly announcing "Ah, just like Greece! I'm happy here." Lavender is drought-tolerant once it has adapted, but it needs occasional water at the roots, especially when newly planted. I noticed during the Sequim Lavender Festival that many of the fields have soaker hoses tucked against the plants.

In your own garden, be sure to take note of what caves-in during dry spells and visit garden displays, often sponsored by local utilities, that don't cave-in.

One great place to drop into: the Waterwise Display Garden at the Bellevue Botanical Garden, 12001 Main St., Bellevue, where you can revel in a beautifully-composed water-efficient landscape. Hold a little water in the palm of your hand, and celebrate.

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