

Water-Wise Gardening Strategies

Water conservation efforts can begin from the moment you start your garden. By: Gayla Trail



Water conservation efforts can begin from the moment you start your garden. Improving the texture of your soil with compost, manure, and other organic matter is good practice for the health of your plants, and it is also a passive way to cut down on your trips to the tap over the long term. Loamy soil that has a light and crumbly cake-like texture retains water much better than sand, yet also offers better drainage than clay that can hold water well but is difficult to rehydrate once dry.

Mulch

Mulching your garden beds is another simple, affordable, and passive way to conserve water and build up the quality of your soil at the same time. Mulch locks moisture in by creating a barrier against hot summer sun and drying winds. Apply a thick 2–3-inch layer of straw, wood chips, bark, newspaper, grass clippings, cocoa shells, pebbles, pine needles, buckwheat hulls, or seaweed at the beginning and end of the garden season. Much of it will break down into the soil, improving its texture and nutrient content with no extra effort on your part. Mulch potted plants too; you'll be pleasantly surprised by how much it cuts down on the need to water.

Collect Water

A rain barrel hooked up to your downspout is an essential way to collect and make use of rainwater and the runoff that occurs during the spring thaw. This spring has been unusually dry and unseasonably hot in my region and unfortunately rain barrels aren't collecting as much water for the future as they usually do. Even still, it can be useful to fill up your barrel from the tap and use that water to irrigate the garden rather than turning on a sprinkler or blasting the hose. The barrel provides a strikingly clear visual of how much water is being used, whereas watering through a hose can feel like a deceptively endless supply.



Drip and Slow-Flow Irrigation

Sprinkler systems and hoses tend to shoot water willy-nilly. Often it is the leaves (and everything else surrounding) that is thoroughly drenched while the soil remains bone dry just below the surface. Soaker hoses and drip irrigation systems are more efficient as they allow the soil to soak up moisture slowly and steadily, straight into the roots where it is needed most.

There is a wide range of irrigation products available to buy at many different price points. Remember that the money you spend now will significantly reduce your water bill over the long term and keep your plants happy to boot. You can also make your own on-the-spot devices that will make a difference in the ground but are especially useful in keeping containers hydrated through heat waves and short trips out of town. Punch or drill teeny tiny holes into the bottom of milk cartons, jugs, or water bottles. Dig a hole directly beside each plant and bury them deeply, right up to the neck, the side with holes facing down. Refill with water whenever they dry out.

RAIN BARRELS 101

When shopping for a rain barrel, the first thing to consider is size. Rain barrels are measured by how many gallons of water they hold, and they can range from five to 5,000 gallons. The latter is more for industrial or business use. Most households only need about 50-75 gallons. The second thing you should consider is how often it rains in your area. If your town's average rainfall per month is low, you don't need an XL barrel. And, alternatively, if you do have a larger rain barrel it may require a pump to funnel water through a garden hose.



Rain barrels come in a variety of shapes and materials, from stone to metal. Plastic is the most popular because it's also lightweight. However, plastics will fade in the sun. Real wood barrels are also available, but wood creates a much easier environment for bacteria to set up camp so it's not a great option if you live in an area with high heat and humidity. The most common misconception about rain barrels is that you can set them up and leave them alone. Rain barrels do require regular cleaning to

prevent mildew and mold. But **no matter how often you clean the barrel, never ever drink runoff water. Don't give it to your pets. Don't water any vegetable gardens with it, and please don't use it to fill up backyard pools.** Because as water runs off your roof, it can pick up traces of harmful chemicals or stuff like bird feces. So, it's best to leave your collected water for tasks such as watering a lawn.

