



How Often Should You Water Your Plants?

By Heather Zevetchin, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

There are many factors to consider when deciding how often to water your plants: soil type, mulch, air temperature, humidity, and plant species. In general, whenever you water it should always be deeply and less often. Adopting this practice leads to healthy, strong-rooted plants. Frequent deep watering, however, causes weak roots. Roots will rot if kept consistently wet. Shallow but frequent watering, on the other hand, leads to a poorly developed root system. The roots never travel deeply into the soil because the moisture remains close to the surface.

Knowing your soil is the first step. Soil holds water, which is why there is no need to water every day. Different soil types hold different levels of moisture. Sandy soil drains water quickly. Clay holds water and is slower to drain. Loamy soils with organic material mixed in are ideal. They hold and drain just the right amount of water most commercially purchased flower and vegetable plants prefer.

Using mulch in beds or gardens helps conserve soil moisture and reduces the need for watering. Whether you use bark, leaves, woodchips, grass clippings or gravel, mulch reduces water evaporation. It also helps control weeds that compete for water and nutrients. Mulch will help maintain soil temperatures, too, by cooling in the summer and insulating in the winter. It assists in combating soil compaction, allowing the water you provide to reach the plant roots. In addition, mulch can add landscape appeal and even protect shrubs and tree trunks from the occasional lawn equipment accident.

Air temperature and humidity also factor in deciding when to water. The best time to water is in the morning, before the heat of the day. The soil is cooler, and the water will have a better chance of absorption before evaporation begins. Morning watering allowing the leaves to dry off in the sun, reducing foliage diseases.

If your plants are showing stress from heat or drought, waiting until the morning is sometimes not an option, though. Looks can be deceiving on hot windy days as the first few inches of the soil appear dried out. Do not automatically assume water is needed. Check the moisture level before giving a deep soak down to about 8 inches. To determine your soil's moisture content, use a wooden dowel to determine to depth of the moisture. Insert the dowel eight inches or so into

the soil and pull it out. A clean dowel means your soil is dry. Soil will stick to the dowel when moist. (This technique is also used in baking to test the moisture level/doneness of baked many goods.) You can also use a trowel to dig into the soil to check the moisture depth or use a soil moisture meter sensor. If your soil is dry below 3 inches, it's time to water.



Give plants infrequent but deep waterings during dry times. Photo by Heather Zevetchin, 2021

The plants you chose and how they are planted directly impact watering schedules. The closer plants are to each other, the faster they remove water from the soil. Giving plants adequate spacing not only helps conserve water but reduces disease through air circulation.

It is important to research the soil and moisture needs of a plant before purchasing. Consider buying plants native to the area in which you are planting. Native plants are adapted to the local environmental conditions and require little to no soil amendment. They use far less water, fertilizer, and pesticides, having a naturally built-in defense against local fungi, diseases, and native insects. They are healthier, stronger, and our indigenous wildlife depend on these plants. Never take native plants from the wild, this can disrupt the ecosystem. Reach out to your local extension center or contact UConn Home & Garden Education for a list of native plants.

There is no single answer to how often you should water your plants. By following the advice above, and monitoring your soil's moisture content, you should be able to come up with the answer perfect for your plants and garden.

If you have questions about watering or on any home or garden topic, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.