

## Water Wisely

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The days are getting longer, our gardens are growing, and the weather will soon be changing. If this were a typical June, we would be well into a summer watering schedule. In our California Mediterranean climate, we experience wet winters and dry summers. We have the luxury of irrigating our gardens during this dry period, and in turn we have the responsibility to use this water carefully according to the needs of our plants rather than the date on the calendar. Before the hot weather finally arrives, take some time now to think about when and how you use water in your garden.

Garden irrigation should vary and reflect changing conditions. The spring rate of watering should be 50 percent of the July rate. In October, as plants stop actively growing, that rate should drop down again to 50 percent. Finally, with winter rains we should stop irrigating. Use a probe or screwdriver to check soil moisture; soil may look dry on the surface but be moist a few inches below. Mulched beds that slow evaporation and keep down weeds will help you stretch out the days between irrigating.

To water efficiently, group plants and water each group according to its needs. Keep water-loving tropical plants in a different area with a different watering schedule from the native and Mediterranean plants which do well with less water in the summer. Evaluate your lawn and how you use it because it uses so much more water than established trees and shrubs. Consider making it smaller or changing the type of grass.

Have you overplanted your beds so that your plants are competing for water and requiring you to water more frequently? Are you using a balanced slow-release fertilizer, are you minimizing pruning, are you cutting your grass less frequently and leaving it an inch or two higher, and are you leaving the clippings on the lawn? Too much fertilizer, severe pruning and close frequent lawn mowing are practices that cause plants to respond with vigorous growth and that in turn requires more water to keep them performing. A good reference to help evaluate water needs is *A Guide to Estimating Irrigation Water Needs of Landscape Plantings in California*, available on the Department of Water Resources Web Site at <http://www.water.ca.gov/wateruseefficiency/docs/wucols00.pdf>.

Finally, examine your irrigation system. Low output systems such as soakers, drip systems, and stream rotors use less water. Fine mist systems often over spray planting beds or put the water into the air rather than in the ground. Take the time to check out your existing system: familiarize yourself with the controller manual; check the batteries and sprinkler heads. If you use a hose, consider purchasing a hose timer that will shut the hose off automatically. Check out the websites of irrigation manufactures or visit their showrooms. Many companies

offer irrigation classes or assistance to homeowners who want to design an efficient irrigation system.

When you do water, think about watering in cycles. Instead of running an irrigation cycle for 12-15 minutes, water in 2 or 3 short cycles of 4 – 5 minutes. This helps prevent run-off and keeps water where you want it. Walk through your garden and look for areas that are too dry or soggy or where you see signs of erosion. These situations will show that your system needs to be adjusted.

If we want to irrigate our gardens wisely and efficiently, this weather can teach us quite a bit about how to water and manage our gardens. We all have to adapt to the current situation and work with nature.

*Alameda County Master Gardeners (ACMGs) are adult volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life who want to help the diverse communities of Alameda County learn more about gardening. ACMGs are trained through the University of California and UC Cooperative Extension to extend research-based knowledge and information on home gardening issues. The Master Gardeners have two demonstration gardens in the county and offer a number of outreach programs to serve the public. For more information, visit <http://acmg.ucdavis.edu/>.*

#### Free Talks

On the 4<sup>th</sup> Saturday of the month, the Alameda County Master Gardeners offer free talks on gardening topics at their Lake Merritt Trails Garden in Oakland. The 15-20 minute talks begin at noon. This month, on June 25, the topic is “Tips for Growing Tomatoes Successfully.”

Getting there: The Trials Garden is located in the center of the community garden area behind the Lakeside Garden Center at 666 Bellevue Avenue, Oakland.