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Watering Your Garden Wisely



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Hot summers may have you considering an entirely [new landscape](#) to save water. Or maybe you already have a carefully designed [xeriscape](#). But whether you are growing thirsty irises or drought-tolerant succulents in your garden, you don't have to wait for a [drought](#) to start saving water. Watering wisely will keep your landscape healthy without wasting earth's most precious resource.

Water-wise Gardens

Water-wise gardening is a whole design and maintenance philosophy. But you can apply some of its [principles](#) regardless of what type of landscape you have. The two most important principles for an existing landscape are to take care of soil health, and water only as much as you need.

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Soil preparation is great for a new landscape. But once the landscape is installed, surface application of [compost](#) and [organic mulches](#) improves soil texture and fertility over time. A thick layer of mulch will also cut down on evaporation from the soil and help keep plant roots cool. Depending on your soil type, additional fertilizer may be required. Only apply as much as needed so you don't contribute to [nonpoint source pollution](#).

Hopefully, your plants are grouped by water needs, so you don't have to overwater some plants in order for others nearby to get enough. (If they are not, plan to transplant mismatched neighbors in the fall.) If you water daily or [water runs](#) down your street after you irrigate, or if you are overwatering. As a general rule, water once a week until the top three inches of soil are nearly saturated. Your watering schedule should change seasonally in response to rainfall and temperature variations.

When you water, go low and slow to ensure that you water the soil instead of the leaves, and to allow time for soil to absorb water before it evaporates or runs off. Collect kitchen and shower water for potted plants and consider installing a [rain barrel](#) to collect supplemental water.



Unlike sprinkler systems, most people can install their own drip irrigation system.

Better Sprinkler Systems

Standing in your yard with a hose or attaching your hose to a sprinkler in the middle of the lawn is the least efficient way to water. But if you really only have a tiny patch of lawn, it may be your only option. Don't sprinkle an area larger than your lawn and use the [tin can method](#) to measure how much water your sprinkler delivers.

Although inefficient, sprinklers are the most commonly installed irrigation systems. To make your [sprinkler system more efficient](#), turn off any sprinkler heads in areas that don't actually need water. Make sure that all operating heads are not blocked by objects or vegetation that will cause water to puddle instead of spray. Replace nozzles to supply a spray area and radius that matches the areas you want to water. Use booster pumps or pressure reducers to keep your system running at the [water pressure](#) for which it was designed.



Routinely check your entire system for broken heads, leaks, and other wasteful problems. Reprogram your system to run according to water-wise principles of watering deeply less often and at cooler times of day. For best results, use [a smart controller](#). Many municipalities offer rebates for installing smart controllers because they can reduce irrigation water use by 30%.

Drip Irrigation Systems

While only 50%-70% of water from a sprinkler system is absorbed by plants, drip irrigation systems [deliver 90%](#) or more directly to plant roots. There are [several types](#) of drip irrigation system. Generally, they comprise a network of plastic pipes to carry water to plants slowly. Sometimes water is delivered through simple holes in the pipes or hoses, but emitter nozzles and micro-misters are also available.

Installing a permanent irrigation system may be outside your budget. But you can lay down soaker hoses seasonally. For aesthetics and greater efficiency, soaker hoses can be covered with mulch. They should be pulled up and stored in the winter, as they can be damaged by freeze/thaw cycles. There are lots of [commercial varieties](#) of soaker hose that slowly release water all along their length. You can also [make your own](#) out of old hoses by poking small holes every six inches and attaching a [hose cap](#) to the open end. You can also lay out the hose in the landscape first and only poke holes near plants to imitate more complicated drip irrigation systems.

Soaker hoses are usually connected to the hose spigot, but some drip systems can be attached to an existing sprinkler system. Unlike sprinkler systems, most people can [install their own](#) drip irrigation system. Expensive irrigation systems can be worth the money, but when it comes to saving water in the garden, using a little bit of wisdom can make a big difference.

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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).