

# Good to Grow: The comforting routine of watering the garden

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Birds love it, dogs and deer love it, and plants love it, too. Of course, I am talking about water. Gardens love a rainy day, but what happens when it's hot and dry for what feels like forever. You gotta help nature out and water the plants.

Maybe you are lucky and have sprinklers timed so that you wake up to a well-watered garden every morning. Great. For me, it's a hose and watering can that keep the garden growing. Both systems work, but both need a plan.

Although I know it is preferable to water in the early morning, this rarely happens at my house. I know that watering early in the day will give my plants the moisture they need to handle the hot temps of the day, and eliminate the risk of mildew or fungus developing overnight on wet leaves. And yet other than a quick drink to those on the porch, most of my watering happens in the evening.

As with many neighborhoods, mine has an ease and predictability to its day. While watering, I often see the after-dinner strollers, power walkers, parents with little ones, and of course the dog walkers. Sometimes it's a quick chat, or a smile and a nod. Other times it is reining in the pup, but the familiar pattern is a pleasant way to unwind from the day.

I, too, have a routine to my watering; always starting with shade plants, and end with the pup waiting for her drink from the hose. Many of my shade plants are new this year and need the water to establish their roots. Garden beds need to be watered deeply, letting the water soak into the soil.

A quick sprinkle every night prevents the roots from growing deep and learning they can find water and nutrients inches below the topsoil. This deep growth promotes a strong plant that — once established — will be able to survive the elements. When taught to expect water every day, the roots have no need to “root” into the ground or learn to take care of themselves.

Rain can be deceiving. A hard pounding rain may produce water, but if the soil is dry, the water can run off and not soak into the soil near the plant. A slow, steady rain is much better for the garden.

Yet, even after the rain, it's a good idea to check the depth of the moisture. Stick your finger about three inches below the surface. Is it wet? Did the leaves form a canopy and keep the rain away from the roots?

If so, you may still need to water. Think about your sprinklers. Are they timed regardless of the rain? Maybe your garden is getting too much water.

Adding layers of organic materials to clay soil will help with water absorption. The same is true for sandy soil. As the organic matter breaks down, it feeds the soil and plants. If possible, it's a good idea to amend the soil annually. Spring is a good time to mix in nutrients, but now works, too. When you add fall plantings to your garden, work with the soil to create a healthy environment for your new additions.

Flowers or vegetables in the direct sun need more water. The same principle applies about watering deeply and developing a strong root system. But remember, these plants are producing blooms and vegetables and they rarely like the soil to be dry.

Are you growing juicy tomatoes, cucumbers and melons? All of these are filled with water, so it makes sense they need water to grow. This might be a place to consider a drip or irrigation hose. The perforated hose winds through the garden resting on the ground, and when the water supply is accessed, it slowly releases water to specific areas.

When it comes to annuals, it is their job to bloom and provide color, not to develop deep roots. Take care to keep their shallow roots watered.

Annuals are often planted in containers; this can affect the amount of water needed. Terra cotta and baskets lined with coco matting will allow the water to evaporate quickly. Metal containers can raise the temperature of the soil, baking the roots.

Don't wait until the plant is sad and wilted, hanging its head in despair before watering. There is no need to create added stress for the plant. We all have enough stress these days, so regular watering is important.

During the crazy, hot days, don't be surprised if containers need a drink of water in the morning and again at night.

This is a judgment call on your part. If you are drinking extra water because of the heat, I bet your plants and pets needs it, too. Many of us routinely add mulch to our garden beds. It looks pretty and helps the soil retain moisture. This also works for your container plantings.

Water is essential for all of us. Drink your eight glasses a day, give your pup an extra drink from the hose and keep a clean water bowl outside.

I hope you find calmness in the routine of watering the garden and containers. Water and watering is a good thing. It keeps the gardener and the garden healthy.