

Using Outdoor Water Wisely

The key to proper watering is to apply only the amount needed at the best time using the best methods possible to minimize water losses and adverse impacts to plants. Consider planting drought tolerant and/or native plants.

Most lawns require about one inch of water each week to remain actively growing during summer months. Vegetable crops require about one to two inches each week depending on root depth, growth stage, and soil type. This represents a lot of water when there is a lack of weekly rainfall, it is crucial that irrigator's pay close attention to the weather and water wisely. Not only does improper irrigation waste valuable water, but excess irrigation water can also carry fertilizers, pesticides and other pollutants to ground and surface waters.

Use a rain gauge to measure weekly rainfall and apply only the amount of supplemental water needed.

Avoid frequent watering, it encourages shallow root depths and can weaken plants. One thorough watering event each week is best.

Use low pressure/low volume watering systems such as soaker hoses and drip irrigation for gardens and beds. This reduces water losses due to evaporation, and the low flow rates minimize the potential for water leaching below the root zone or running off the surface. Water is also applied at or near the root zone where the plant needs it.

When using sprinklers:

Avoid irrigating during hot, windy parts of the day to reduce evaporation loss--early morning is best as wet plant foliage during evening hours can increase susceptibility to disease.

Be sure that automatic sprinklers have a manual control option– irrigate according to weekly rainfall amounts and not a set, automatic schedule.

Avoid irrigating paved surfaces, roads and driveways.

Use shallow cans to measure the amount of water being applied.

Adjust the flow rate to the sprinklers to avoid surface runoff.

Other important tips:

Consider planting drought tolerant plants – especially in those spots where the soil is already very dry and sandy. Soils differ in the amount of water they can hold, so save moisture-loving plants for areas with finer, heavier soils.

During a serious, prolonged drought consider allowing lawns to go naturally dormant, because watering can actually stress the grass more by forcing it to grow under such adverse conditions.

Use rain barrels or cisterns to collect and store rainwater.

Use mulch to conserve soil moisture in beds and gardens. Increase soil organic matter (and soil moisture holding capacity) through mulching and adding compost or other organic soil amendments.