



# *More Garden Dirt*

## *Great garden tips from Living Landscapes!*

### Unraveling the Mysteries of Watering

During times of drought, when water use is restricted, we're apt to realize that water is both vital and precious. Water is vital to plants, because it's integral to all plant functions. It maintains a plant's shape and rigidity (that's why thirsty plants wilt) and it's an essential component of photosynthesis or food production.

Water also dissolves minerals from the soil and from fertilizers to be drawn up, absorbed, and used by the plant. In other words, fertilizers are wasted if there's not enough water to make them available. Water is so important that if a plant is stressed by a lack of water in the summer, it will become more susceptible to insects and disease and, ultimately, less winter hardy. In effect, stress in the summer leads to continued stress throughout the year.

It is crucial then, to stay on top of your plants' water needs in order to maintain the vigor that will allow them to withstand pests and diseases. With plants, as with humans, it's easier to maintain good health than it is to battle back from disease.

When water is less plentiful, it's even more important to water as effectively as possible. Ironically, watering is one of the harder gardening skills to master. Knowing how long and how often to water can be confusing, because it depends upon soil type, wind, temperature, watering method and even water pressure. The first step, however, is to understand your soil.

Soil structure determines how quickly water penetrates the soil, and how quickly it drains away. Light, sandy soils allow water to penetrate quickly and deeply. Water percolates through so quickly, in fact, that sandy soil also dries out quickly and tends to be under watered. On the other hand, heavy clay soils absorb water more slowly and drain more slowly. As a result, they have a greater potential to be over watered. Since both types of soil exist in our area, and both can occur in one yard, there is no substitute for knowing your own landscape.

When watering, be sure to fill the entire root zone with water. The best way to tell if you've watered long enough is to reach down into the soil to see if it's moist. Remember that the root zone of a tree or large shrub is deeper than that of a smaller plant. As a result, it takes longer to thoroughly wet its roots. Also, remember that water may penetrate and drain away at different rates in different areas of your yard; don't assume anything, check around. – Continued –



## Watering continued –

### General watering tips:

- Don't just water long, water well.
- Add organic matter to your soil (like composted lawn clippings, leaves and kitchen scraps) to help sandy soil hold water longer and clay soil to accept water more quickly.
- Use mulch to reduce run-off, improve water penetration and limit competitive and thirsty weeds.
- Water early in the day to experience less evaporation.
- Don't water faster that the water can be absorbed – run-off is lost to the plants.
- When watering a newly planted tree or shrub, be aware that the nursery soil is different than your own. Water doesn't move easily between different soils, so be sure to water both the plant and the surrounding soil. Since roots will only grow where there is moisture, they won't reach out if the surrounding area is dry. This can result in girdled roots and, ultimately, the death of the plant.
- To sum up: Water that percolates through is useless.  
Water that evaporates is useless.  
Water lost to run-off is useless.  
Amend, mulch, water slowly, water deeply and water well.

Got it? Great! Your plants will thank you!