

How to Reduce Water Consumption in Your Garden

When reservoirs are low and weather is dry, reduce your garden's need for water by xeriscaping, switching to targeted irrigation, and protecting plants with mulch.

It's becoming increasingly clear that gardeners around the world need to plan for a drier future. Growing populations and shrinking water supplies in regions from western China to the American Colorado River basin are increasing the pressure for gardeners to reduce water use in their landscaping.

Water rationing, once used only in emergencies, is now a part of daily life in Australia and other drought-prone areas. Experts predict that increasing pressure on world water supplies will bring strict limits on water consumption in gardens even in areas that get year-round rainfall.

Plan Ahead by Xeriscaping Your Garden

The most effective way to reduce your water consumption is to plant drought-tolerant plants that don't need much watering. If you really want to grow some thirstier plants like roses and tomatoes, create a few irrigated areas and restrict your watering to those areas. Fill in the rest of the landscaping with drought-tolerant plants that can thrive without watering. For flowers, irrigate spots that you can see from the street or inside your house.

Make Trees and Shrubs Top Watering Priority in Times of Shortages

If you need to make significant cuts in your water usage, cut back on other areas before you stop watering trees and shrubs. Mature trees help reduce air pollution, control storm water runoff, reduce the need for air conditioning in hot weather, and can contribute thousands of dollars to a property's value. If you lose a mature tree, it can take many years before a replacement tree grows to mature size. If necessary, let lawns and groundcovers go brown during droughts. They can be re-grown much faster and more cheaply than a tree or specimen shrub.

Use Drip Irrigation to Control Water Use, Reduce Waste

Only 65-75% of the water from sprinklers is actually used by the watered plants. 25% or more evaporates or runs off without being used. By contrast, drip irrigation is more than 90% efficient, because it applies water directly to the plant's root zone. Switch to drip irrigation wherever possible to make sure the water you use gets delivered to the exact spot where it is needed.

Mulch to Protect Existing Plants Against Drought

Mulch is any organic material spread evenly over the surface of the soil. It helps suppress weeds that compete for water with garden plants. It also keeps the soil cooler and helps it retain moisture longer. Instead of disposing of green waste such as fallen leaves, grass clippings, or plant trimmings, use them as mulch. You can compost them first or simply use as they are. For a more finished look, consider commercial mulches like wood chips or shredded bark.

Tips for Successful Mulching

Done properly, mulch is very good for your garden. Done wrong, it can damage your plants. These tips will help you get the most from your mulching:

- *Make sure soil is moist before you mulch.* If your area has dry seasons, try to mulch before the dry season starts and the soil dries out.
- *Avoid using fine-textured shredded wood waste.* This can mat together and keep moisture from reaching the soil, especially if you're using drip irrigation that applies water a little at a time.
- *Spread mulch to the right depth.* Too much mulch can prevent air from reaching the soil and encourage mold growth. Too little reduces its water-saving benefits. Most types of mulch should be spread about three inches deep. If you use mixed green waste, spread it no more than two inches deep.
- *Keep mulch away from the base of woody plants.* The base of trees and shrubs need air.
- *Avoid mulch that has a sour smell.* If it smells bad, it may not have been stored properly.
- *Leave some areas unmulched* so beneficial insects that nest in the soil can reach the ground.

Simple measures like these can save significant amounts of water in your garden.