

Water and Mulch: The Best Defenses Against Summer Heat

Gaye Mara, Fairfax County Master Gardener

Savvy watering and mulching practices that start in the spring are the keys to survival for the summer garden. They produce sturdy, deep-rooted plants that can survive your August vacation.

Watering

The first principle of watering is to water deeply, but not frequently. Frequent, shallow watering encourages plant roots to grow just in the top few inches of soil. Shallow-rooted plants are at risk in hot weather when the top layer of soil dries out. This is true for lawns as well as garden plants.

How much to water. The rule of thumb is one inch of water per week. If natural rainfall provides enough water, great; if not, we must make up the difference. But don't water more than once a week except in the hottest weather (container-grown plants, which dry out more quickly, may need daily watering at that time). To measure rainfall or sprinkler output, you can buy a rain gauge at a garden center, or make your own by marking off the inside of a can in inches and sinking it partway into the soil.

You can also tell when the garden needs water by poking your finger into the soil. If the top 3 inches are dry, it's time to water. Your grass needs water if the blades curl and turn crisp and bluish in very hot weather.

Too much water is as bad as too little, because it drives air out of the soil, drowns roots, and promotes pathogens. For that reason I'm not a fan of automatic watering systems that come on whether or not water is needed. If you can ball up a handful of wet soil and it holds its shape without crumbling, the garden is too wet. Let it dry out before you water again.

When to water. The best time is early morning. The sun and soil are not yet hot enough to evaporate the moisture too quickly, and the foliage has time to dry off before dark. Darkness plus damp foliage is the perfect recipe for many fungus diseases.

The soaker hose. After trying various types of sprinklers, my favorite watering device is the soaker hose, buried under a layer of mulch and left in place through the growing season. If you fasten it down with sod nails (also known as anchoring pins), it will lay out for you obediently instead of trying to coil back into fetal position. A soaker hose drips water under extremely low pressure, at barely more than a trickle, so you have to run it for a good 4 hours to get deep watering.

Mulch

In nature, leaf litter and other decomposing plant and animal tissues protect and renew the soil. In the garden we use mulch for that purpose.

Mulch protects garden plants in three important ways:

1. It keeps down weeds.
2. It retains soil moisture.
3. It stabilizes soil temperature.

A fine organic mulch (such as dry fall leaves chopped up under the lawnmower, dried grass clippings or pine needles, or Virginia Fines shredded pine bark) provides two additional benefits:

4. It replenishes the organic content of the soil as it decomposes.
5. You don't have to remove it in the spring to get rid of overwintering insects and funguses, which take up residence in coarser mulches that don't break down into the soil. Just layer fresh mulch right on top.

Lay the mulch 2-3" deep, and 2-3" away from plant stems (damp mulch against stems will rot them).

Photo: A soaker hose will gently drip-water the garden. It can be left in place all summer, anchored with sod nails.

