

Conserving Water in the UK. We could learn something from our friends to the East! 2006

How to save water in your garden

With hosepipe bans and water restrictions in effect in some areas, Jane Perrone gives some tips on keeping

your garden green while saving water .

Friday March 31, 2006

Echinacea flowers, a drought-resistant perennial. Photograph: Sarah Martone/AP

Dire warnings from the Environment Agency and local councils about hosepipe bans and other restrictions on water usage this summer could strike fear into the hearts of gardeners and allotment holders in southern and eastern England.

Plot holders are often experts at saving water, as many allotment sites already ban or severely restrict hosepipe use as a matter of course. Hosepipes can suck up 1,000 litres of water an hour, but there are ways of tending your garden without sending your water meter spinning around. Here are some tips to keep your garden green while saving water.

Watering techniques

Your garden plants probably need less water than you think. Watering little and often does not help, as the water does not penetrate deep into the ground and encourages plants to develop roots near the soil's surface. One good soak every 10 days is better than a daily sprinkle. You can find out if you need to water by digging a hole a spade's depth in the soil and examining the soil: only water if the soil feels dry to the touch.

When you do need to water, use a watering can - it's great exercise for your arms - and do it in the cool of the morning or evening to prevent the water being evaporated by the heat of the sun. Make sure that the water you give

to your plants gets to where it is needed - the roots - rather than running off.

One useful technique, particularly on "thirsty" plants such as tomatoes and courgettes, is placing plants in a saucer-shaped dip of soil so the water pools around them. Alternatively, you can bury a plastic bottle, cap removed and opening down, in the earth next to plants. Cut the bottom off and you will be able to add water that will percolate down straight to the roots. When watering hanging baskets, position other container plants underneath so that water draining away is not wasted.

Mulches

It helps if you stop the soil becoming dry in the first place, by evaporation by the wind or sun. A mulch is simply a layer of material placed on the surface of the soil that helps to stop weeds from flourishing, prevents water evaporation from the soil and improve the condition of the soil.

They can be made from natural materials such as chipped bark, cocoa shells, gravel, grass cuttings or straw, although on allotments, where aesthetics are not such a concern, plastic sheeting is also popular - the vegetables are simply planted in slits in the material. Flowerbeds that have been mulched will need considerably less water than those with bare soils: and the thicker the mulch, the more effective it is - a mulch of at least 5-10cm will make a big difference.

Grey water

It is simply water used for domestic tasks such as bathing and washing clothes that is allowed to cool, then saved from going down the plughole and redirected to the garden - either by bucket, or specially installed outlet pipes. This water is fine to use to water plants, particularly if you avoid using harsh detergents, although most water companies counsel against using such water on fruit or vegetables. Research by the Environment Agency found that people who saved their grey water cut their water meter figures by 5% to an impressive 36%.

Water butts

A water butt or two will help to harvest rainwater from your roof. Given that 24,000 litres can be collected from the average roof, this is no small contribution to your water supply. A butt should be positioned to siphon off water from one of the downpipes from your roof, ideally in a position giving easy access to your garden. The water collected is a valuable resource, suitable for filling your pond and watering plants indoors and out. Butts cost anywhere from £25, although some water companies offer special deals.

Plant drought-tolerant plants

Find out about the huge range of plants that will survive without regular dousings, from the beautiful purple-pink flowers of the echinacea or cone flower and the startling blue of the ceanothus to the ever-popular geranium and the retro charm of the red hot poker.

Lawns

The sight of sprinklers spraying water across verdant lawns may be a thing of the past if England's water shortage continues. So what do you do to stop your grass burning to a crisp this summer? There are a few steps you can take that will help, but ultimately gardeners have to realise that green lawns in the height of summer just aren't cool any more.

If you cannot place your lawn with drought tolerant planting schemes, try cutting back on your outings with the lawn mower, and when you do cut, raise the cutting level, as a longer cut will help grass to survive dry weather. Then use the cuttings as a mulch around the bases of trees and shrubs. If your grass goes go brown, do not worry - it will recover quickly once autumn rolls around.

Have you got more tips for saving water in the garden? Send your ideas to jane.perrone@guardian.co.uk

· Jane Perrone blogs about her garden and allotment at Horticultural

Readers' tips:

If you run a long garden cane across the lawn in the early morning, the dew on the grass will fall down towards the soil rather than drying off in the sunshine.

Elaine Harris

My patio plants in pots are the main thing I have to water and I always use a fine gravel, a pea gravel or slate chippings to cover the top of the soil. The pots hardly ever dry out completely, and the combination of different toppings adds colour and texture to the pots. It's also sensible to move pots out of direct sunlight if you can when water is scarce - most plants like a bit of shade from time to time.

Andrew Manning

Put a rainwater collector and water butt onto the waste-pipe from the bathroom - this will make collection of bathwater automatic.

Nick Jones

If you have a waterbutt which fills up after a decent shower make sure all available watering cans are full so that when it rains again you have a bit more to use; and don't grow annuals which need tons of water, grow perennials which have the winter to get their roots soaked over a longer time and often need nothing more.

Dona Haycraft

I always saw up old small (2 inch) drainpipes at about 8 inches to plant alongside roses and such so that I can water the roots and also

occasionally feed through them. If you wish to use old drinks bottles, saw off the bottom, remove the lid and plant upside down - easier to fill and slower to filter though. When rain is forecast I plunge a cane over and over again into the soil between all the plants, the better for the rain to seep in. With a long cane this is a pleasant, easy job in the sunshine. Anyone living in a bungalow can unscrew the outside cap from their bathroom wastepipe before emptying the bath if it gives onto a suitable place for watering. I also continually harangue my local council to clean the gulleys with those wonderful machines so that rainwater does not just evaporate.

Georgeanne Slater

Here in Vancouver, Canada, it's possible to purchase these drip systems to outfit a home garden. I set up a series of eight, 40ft drip hoses in my parent's garden, and they work wonderfully, last at least 7 years, and do not deteriorate due to sun exposure or freezing. When we have water shortages in summer, these systems are exempt from any sprinkling bans, as they are so efficient.

Jerry Pedersen

I usually keep several large terracotta pots around. While rather unsightly, it really works to put a plastic milk jug filled with water (with one minute pinhole in its base which sweats rather than drips) on top of the soil in the pot for a very slow IV drip while I am away for a few days.

Donna Duren

I have a tip for those serious about watering their garden plants. If you put a bucket in the shower when you turn on the water, while the water is getting warm, you'll be surprised how much water you can collect. I can water my herb garden and all the pots of stuff on my deck and patio with just that otherwise-wasted water. In the summer. During a drought.

A tip from our own WEAL Board member Ellen Gennrich