

# Watering Tips

**Plants are alive. We all know this. We all know they need a few things to stay alive and as their new caretakers that is our responsibility. The biggest and possibly most intimidating question is how to keep them properly hydrated. Alas, when asked, often a nebulous answer full of caveats passes through the lips of professionals. Does that mean knowing how much to water your plant is impossible? Absolutely not. Are there a few key factors that will help you in your role as caregiver? Definitely. Let's attempt to demystify the world of watering.**

**We'll start with something we know for sure. It's best to water in the morning. Plants like to have their full dose of H<sub>2</sub>O early to help them grow through the sunny day. Also, when left wet through the night they are more susceptible to diseases. Does that mean you should skip watering if you can't get to it in the morning? No. Choose a wet night before choosing drought. Another thing we know is how to water. Plants in the ground like a slow thorough soaking which differs from container plants that prefer smaller amounts of water more**



**frequently. Soil can only absorb water at a certain rate; the dense clay found throughout Missouri is especially slow on the uptake. High pressure watering for a short period of time will create run off leaving the ground just below the surface dry. The point of watering is to soak the soil below the plant well to encourage the root system to grow deeply. An extensive root system creates a healthier, heartier plant able to survive cold and drought by allowing more roots greater access to nourishment which in turn builds stronger branching and leaves.**

**Now the big question, how often? For plants in the ground the best way to water is a deep thorough soaking with time to dry slightly before watering again. Container plants evaporate more quickly and need more frequent watering than plants in the ground. Plants need water and oxygen to help their root system grow. Roots suck up water and oxygen from the soil. Over watering does not allow roots to absorb oxygen. More plants are killed by over watering than under watering. The external signs of over watering are yellow, wilting leaves towards the inner part of the plants. Dry, under watered plants wilt from the outside in. If your plant shows sign of over watering let the soil dry out some before watering. If the plant is drying out bring it back slowly. A water starved plant cannot take in water at the rate of a healthy plant, so don't deluge the plant with water everyday to make up for the drought conditions. Water until absorption and let soil dry out some before watering again,**

don't keep the plant saturated.

Plants need more water when it is hot, dry, windy, during the first part of the growing season and especially after being transplanted. When first placed in soil roots have not extended into the soil leaving the plant reliant on outside means to get water. After about a month the amount of watering can be reduced as roots are better established. Plants need very little water when they have few leaves. More rainfall equals less watering for you, little rainfall means more watering. Plants enjoy humid weather far more than we humans. A nice dry summer day when we are rejoicing from the break in humidity, plants are very thirsty. Other factors affecting plant hydration include the drainage and grade of the plants location. Lower grades where water pools will require less watering than higher locales. Choosing a plant that can tolerate a lot of water should definitely be considered for low lying areas or other notoriously wet places like below downspouts. Proper plant placement will increase the likelihood a plant will thrive. Grouping plants of similar water needs will help simplify your watering routine.



Because of the many variables that influence plant hydration levels there is no specific formula for how much to water. Thankfully, a general idea of how much to water plants will suffice. Being mindful of the aforementioned factors that influence plant hydration will allow you to come up with your own formula that works. One tip that may help you get to know your plants is when first learning how often to water your plant occasionally check your soil. In many cases doubts about whether or not to water can be alleviated by assessing the water content of the soil. One technique we tell people is to stick a long bladed screwdriver in the soil. If it is really difficult to get into the ground, your soil is dry. When checking the soil it is not the first inch or two that is of interest, it is deeper where you want the root system to grow. Remember, you can't fix dry soil all in one day. A torrential downpour in a desert causes massive flooding and run off because the hard, dry soil is ill prepared to take in a vast amount of water. But, give the desert some consistent moderate rainfall over a few days and the downpour will be much better absorbed because the soil is primed. It will take many thorough soakings over several days to return the proper water content to the soil. If the screwdriver goes in easily and comes out muddy, the soil is too wet. Give the soil some time to dry out and check again. This will give you a much better idea of how long you should go in between watering. Then when a hot, dry day arises in between your typical every other day watering routine you can easily make the call to go ahead and water. Good luck, and remember, no matter what happens you will gain more knowledge with every plant you tend.