

Increasing Drought Tolerance and Using Water Wisely

With water being metered and hose bans in various areas of the country, it makes both financial and environmental sense to cut down on the amount of watering that we do, as well as making life easier.

Borders and vegetable plots

In order to make sure that the soil is holding the optimum amount of water and plants are able to extract it from the soil easily it is a good idea to improve your soil, particularly if it is either sandy or if it is very heavy. **Sandy** soils are easy to work but tend to be very free draining and don't hold water or nutrients well. In order to make them more water-retentive incorporate some organic matter, such as garden compost or ready bagged compost – eg Westland Organic Garden Compost or Miracle-Gro Eco Sense Soil Improver. Bagged farmyard manure is also available which is beneficial with regard to improving soil structure. **Clay** soils hold water well but don't release it easily to plants. They are also harder to work. To improve a clay soil dig in some organic matter and fine grit or grit sand. You could also use a product such as Clay Breaker. Whatever your soil types it pays to incorporate some organic matter at least once a year in the autumn, preferably, or in spring.

Mulching is also a great way to retain water and cuts down dramatically on weeding. It can also make borders look more neat and attractive. Chipped or composted bark may be used in flower borders. The best time to apply is in early spring, before weeds emerge and whilst there is still plenty of moisture in the soil. (If the soil happens to be on the dry side water it thoroughly before applying mulch)

In the vegetable plot you can adopt strategies such as planting through a plastic mulch sheet and/or use a drip irrigation system. Agralan also make self-watering cloches whereby water is diverted back inside the cloche by a gutter system.

Lawns

Nobody likes to see their lawn looking yellow or, at worst, brown through lack of water. To make your lawn more drought resistant and help it utilise water well apply an autumn feed between September and November. Not only does this toughen up the grass and keep it healthy over winter, it encourages root growth so that the roots can tap down for water more efficiently. Any build up of thatch should be raked out using a spring tine rake. If it is not removed thatch can impede the downward flow of water. Spiking the lawn in autumn to a depth of about 15cm, applying a top dressing and working this into the channels that have been spiked will help your lawn retain water. In the spring it is a good idea to lightly prick over the surface of the lawn with a garden fork to a depth of a couple of inches so that any rain that falls will permeate down to the root area more easily.

Standard granular lawn fertilisers need to be watered in if no rain falls within 48 hours of application. If you wish to avoid watering in, either use a soluble or liquid product that is actually applied with water or choose a granular product that does not need to be watered in, such as Scotts' Lawn Builder range, Westland Aftercut or Scotts' 'I want to Feed my Lawn after Cutting.'

Containers

It is a time consuming task watering containers up to twice a day to keep them looking good throughout the summer. You can cut down on watering by adding water retaining gel at planting time or by using a compost that has water retaining gel already incorporated, such as Scotts' Moisture Control, Scotts' Multi-purpose Compost or Westland Container & Hanging Basket compost.

Water efficiently

Store excess water in water butts where possible. You can also get drainpipe connectors to make this even more efficient. Water in the evening so that evaporation is kept to a minimum. Micro-irrigation is also worth considering for various areas of the garden. This can be timed to keep it both efficient and effective and, of course, it is very labour saving and handy if you are away.