

Tips for Gardening in Dry Weather

I asked a visitor to our nursery, a professional gardener, what she thought were the most important elements in helping a garden weather the non-storms of a dry summer. She said that it all comes back to the initial planting and to letting your plants tough it out a bit so that they become hardier. She also puts a lot of emphasis on saving water for the garden every time she turns on a tap – a bucket in the shower to catch the initial cold water as it runs through, collecting the water used to wash fruit and vegies in, sitting a container under the tap at hand washing time. It is amazing how much water goes ‘down the drain’, which could be tipped onto pots and gardens.

Selection: We need to choose the majority of our plants from the group that are hardy to our area and which have low water requirements. These include pig face, cistus (rock rose), philadelphus, geraniums, roses, diosmas, penstemons, lavenders and many natives. Check the water requirements for natives because many originate from other parts of the country and may not necessarily suit the climate here.

We can also grow plants that need a bit more water if we group them together. It would be a good idea to have them close to the house or taps so that we apply the ‘saved’ water readily or give them that extra drink. This group includes some herbs like parsley, basil and mints, and potted plants, which will need more water than the same plants growing in the ground.

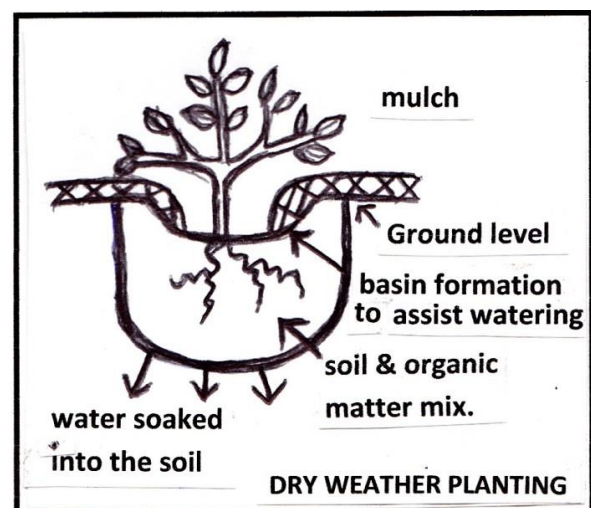
Succulents can make do with little water. Consider frost hardy varieties or plant them in protected spots. Sculptural in form, succulents are ideal for pots, old wheelbarrows, urns, under trees, around the steps and in dry corners. They look great in mixed groups or in swathes of a single species. One of my favourites is the taller Sedum Autumn Joy, which has a soft grey green leaf and gorgeous peachy pink flowers.

Protection: Siting and protecting beds is important. Wind is as drying as sun so it is a good idea to create both wind and shade protection for exposed sites. Put in plants that will provide you with that protection in the long term, but use lattice, shade cloth, temporary fast growing plants or anything that will create a gentler microclimate now, in order to get your permanent plantings underway. Check for damper and drier spots in your garden and use that knowledge to help you place plants. We have dry areas near eucalypts and at the tops of slopes and some natural drainage areas which retain more moisture.

Planting techniques: Ideal planting out provides the young plant with a water reservoir and nutrient reserves while ensuring that the roots will make their way out into the ground. Sit the potted plant in water so that it soaks it up from the bottom. Dig a hole about three times as big as the pot. Fill the empty hole with water three times and let it soak through into the sub soil. This will put water down deep where you want the roots to go. If water can only be found near the surface, the plant will develop shallow roots which are very vulnerable in dry weather.

Mix the dirt you took out of the hole with about 30 % organic matter. You can use compost, straw or well-rotted manure for exotic plants or compost alone for native plants. The organic matter will help retain water and will feed the plant, as it continues to rot down and improve the soil structure. Worms will come up and take the goodies further down over time, improving drainage as well. The soil in the mix creates a link to the wider soil.

Tip the plant out of the pot and loosen the roots if they are a bit tight. Back fill the hole so that the plant can be placed with the planting level from the pot about 7 cm below ground level. Create a basin below ground level around the plant. If you have clay soil that might not drain so well, create a mound and then plant into that, making a basin above original ground level. Water the plant in well.



Mulch the area around the plant, keeping the mulch about 7 cm away from the trunk or stem. The mulch prevents evaporation but might also prevent light rain penetrating the soil. You will need to water occasionally to help plants get established but it is best to do a deep watering now and then rather than a light watering often. A drip system will help to save water and can be used with a timer. Once the plants are growing well, the toughening up consists of encouraging deeper root growth by spacing deep waterings out until they are rarely needed.

Vegie Gardens and Orchards: The same ideas of placing like water needs crops together and adding organic material to the soil can help with your vegie patch. Set up dripper systems with the ability to water deep rooted plants less often than shallow rooted ones. Consider some simple frames that can have shade cloth thrown over them for those shocker heatwave days. Use crops to provide shade for each other, eg planting lettuce on the east side of climbing beans or corn. Site the beds so that they are sheltered from wind and receive a good amount of sun without being baked. Use mulches that will rot down in a season, such as pea straw, to prevent evaporation and feed the soil. Mulch fruit trees and citrus trees to the drip line because they have shallow feeder roots. Keep competing weeds away.

An alternative system could be to set up wicking pots and beds for edibles and ornamental plants that do not have very deep root systems. Have a look at the ABC gardening show fact sheet <http://www.abc.net.au/gardening/stories/s4010599.htm> for the basic idea. Essentially, you create a water reservoir beneath the soil and moisture is drawn up through the soil to the roots. The plants receive a constant supply of water without becoming waterlogged and topping up of the reservoir can be done weekly or fortnightly, eliminating daily watering.

Of course, a wet winter and spring are what we all want to help us with our summer gardening, but they are not pre-requisites. Be clever with plant selection, siting, preparation and watering and you will be able to create a beautiful and productive garden, despite the dry weather.

Happy gardening!

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