

## CONSERVING WATER IN YOUR VEGETABLE GARDEN

San Diego has been experiencing quite a happy wet and cool winter/spring. Soon the sun will return, (I promise) and your plants will really start to need water, especially in your vegetable garden.

Vegetables are definitely not “low water use” plants. You *will* need to water your veggies, and one big understandable concern everyone has is how much water gets used. Here then are a few ways to conserve water in your vegetable garden.

Avoid any type of overhead watering. Much of the water is lost to the air, and we don't want water on our veggies' foliage anyway. Keep your watering low and close to the ground; *water the soil, not the plant*. Soaker hoses and drip systems keep water close to the ground. Watering “by hand” with a simple hose nozzle is a form of overhead watering. Use a watering wand, which is a long shaft that attaches to the end of your hose. In this way you can water the ground without bending over close to the ground.

Never water in the middle of the day when at least some of the water will be lost to evaporation. Inland, it's better to water in the evening, so the water has time to really soak into the ground. In cooler coastal climates where certain plant diseases are common, it is better to water in the morning, so that water does not sit on the foliage overnight.

Water slowly and thoroughly with each watering. We want the water to go deep so that roots grow deep, which results in stronger plants.

In raised beds and containers, *be sure to water the edge of the bed/container*. I see many gardeners water “just the plant” in the middle of the bed/container. A result, the edges of the bed/container are not moist. When growing roots reach the dry soil at the edge of the bed/container, guess what? They stop growing. We want the edges of our raised beds, pot, and containers to be evenly moist so that roots continue to grow once they reach the edge.

Planting crops at optimal spacings ensures efficient ground coverage, reduces weeds, and results in less water use. “Packing it all in” too closely results in more competition for water, as well as light, which decreases yield.

Top off your raised beds gardens with organic compost as the soil level sinks, which it inevitably will. More soil volume results in more nutrition and water retention for your plants.

Gardeners often ask me what kind of mulch to use in the vegetable garden. In the broadest sense, “mulch” means anything that covers the ground. Therefore, all mulches (e.g. bark, rocks, carpet remnants, etc.) will conserve water to varying degrees.

But we’re always “working” our vegetable garden soil by harvesting and replanting. The best kind of mulch is therefore one that feeds the plants *and can be turned into the ground*, like compost, a “fertile” mulch. Just spread compost on top of your garden or raised bed, and just leave it on top as a fertile mulch. Alternatively mix it in right away or as you plant new crops.

Do not use bark or wood chips as a mulch in your vegetable garden. You don’t want that stuff mixing with your soil, which it inevitably will when used as a mulch.

The number one goal when conserving water or doing anything in your garden is to have fun. Remember that. It’s gotta be fun!