

NORTH COAST YARD & GARDEN

HORTICULTURAL NEWS AND INFORMATION FOR THE OHIO GARDENER

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IN MY GARDEN

While the reasons for gardening are as varied as gardeners themselves, one important motivation is the notion that gardening does something to help the environment. A great way to achieve this is to use every resource from your yard to the betterment of the garden. Composting leaves and clippings is a common technique and it keeps nutrients in the soil and out of the landfill. Few gardeners put as much thought and energy into managing water use in the garden.

Gardeners and environmentalists are becoming more concerned with water quality and conservation. Landscapes, and lawns in particular, can be real water hogs if poorly designed and incorrectly maintained. More than half of all municipal water nationwide is used outdoors. A substantial proportion of this water is wasted through overwatering or runoff. Natural sources of water are then unnecessarily depleted, and runoff water carries fertilizers, pesticides and other contaminants back to the streams and waterways. Even organic techniques can contribute to water pollution; manure is one of the major sources of contamination and contributes to "dead zones" in our lakes.

Rain water is an excellent resource for the garden. It is rich in nitrogen and lacks the fluoride and chlorine that can damage sensitive plants. Best of all, it is free. It is certainly not reliable, as Northern Ohio



learned this year. After suffering a three month drought May through July, August brought record-high rainfall with two flooding storms near the beginning of the month. Gardeners are seeking ways to capture excessive rain and store it for use during dry spells.

The largest obstacle for efficient water use in this area is our clay soil. Clay takes a long, long time to absorb water, so only the slowest and steadiest of showers will soak in. The rest runs off the soil and out of the garden. A good layer of topsoil several inches deep will absorb a lot of water and make it available to plants. A small yard with six inches of topsoil can hold 1500 gallons more water than a yard with no topsoil. Raised beds around the garden's borders will help slow runoff by trapping some water in surface puddles until it can be absorbed. Maximizing the use of rain water reduces maintenance and the water bill. It is also another way good gardening helps the environment.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

WATER-SMART GARDENING

Watering is one of the most difficult issues in gardening. If a plant is not getting the correct amount of water, whether too much or too little, it will suffer stress and perform poorly. Growth is reduced, fewer flowers and fruits are produced, and the plant becomes more susceptible to attack by insects and disease. Little wonder that masters of bonsai, the art of growing and shaping miniature trees in pots, will allow new trainees to prune plants far before they are allowed to water. A plant that is snipped incorrectly will grow back, but a tree that has drowned or dried out will remain dead.

More plants are damaged or killed by overwatering than by underwatering. Overwatering can mean too much water at one time, but usually it is caused by watering too often. The only way to know if a plant needs water is to check the soil moisture a few inches down. Do not water until the soil a few inches below the surface is just barely moist, like a completely wrung-out sponge.

When you choose new plants for the yard, take into consideration whether the plants prefer dry, normal or moist conditions. Group plants with similar needs together so that you can water more efficiently. Put plants that need more water near the house or hose so that it won't be a chore to water them. If your landscape has a low area that collects water, or has a spot that seems to be always damp, this is the place for plants that like a lot of water.

Put plants that get by without much water in the farthest parts of the garden so that you do not need to drag the hose out to them constantly. Plants that like dry soil

also do well in high spots where water drains away quickly, or in sunny areas where the soil dries out.

Don't forget that new plants need to get supplemental water even if they grow in dry soil. It takes about three years before a plant has a root system fully developed and able to find water on its own. Monitor the plant daily for the first few weeks after planting it, and then once or twice a week for the rest of the first year. Check the plant at least once a month during the second year, and more often during hot and dry weather. During the third year the plant should do fine on its own except under extreme conditions.

Remember that grass lawns need much more water than landscape plantings of flowers, shrubs and trees. Set up the sprinkler so that the water stays out of planting beds, and especially off of pavement. If you install a sprinkler system, make sure that separate zones are created for the lawn and for planting beds.

A well-planned garden goes a long way toward making use of natural rainfall by siting plants that need more water in low spots, and putting plants that don't like water in higher spots. Many gardens are basically flat with no variation in elevation or drainage. If conditions are not right for plants you want to grow, you will have to change them.

If you are growing plants that need well-drained soil and they seem to stay too wet, plant them in a raised bed. Simply pile soil six or more inches deep on top of the existing soil. Edge the raised bed with stones, logs or plastic garden edging, or just let the soil level slope down around the sides. Many herbs need drier soil with good drainage, including lavender, sage and rosemary. Azaleas, rhododendrons,

heather, Japanese andromeda, ornamental grasses, sedum and other succulents also do best with good drainage.

If you want to grow plants that like water with some help from the rain, you can create your own low spot that will collect water. Just dig out a shallow depression in the ground at least six inches below the surrounding soil level. If you have a thin layer of topsoil, save the topsoil, dig an extra few inches down into the ground, and then put the topsoil back down. This type of arrangement is often called a rain garden because it collects extra rain water. You will have even more success with a rain garden if you are able to create it near a downspout to provide extra rain.

Rain gardens are an important step in helping preserve the water quality in our natural environment. Rain washes fertilizer out of lawns and gardens and into streams and lakes where it encourages suffocating algae. Rain also carries motor oil and other toxins off of pavement and into waterways. Soil is the best filter for water, and rain water that stays in the soil does not move contaminants.

Rain gardens make good use of rain when it comes. Rain water can be stored for dry periods by using rain barrels. A downspout is directed into the opening at the top of a barrel that usually holds about fifty gallons of water. The barrel has a spigot at the bottom so the water can be easily drained when needed. A small 1000 square foot roof will shed about 150 gallons of water after a quarter-inch of rain, and after a two-inch downpour there is over a thousand gallons of water available. Rain barrels can be connected so that when one overflows, water is diverted to the next rain barrel in line, and so on.

Gardeners in dry climates may not want to let a single drop of rain water escape, and may install a cistern, or rain water holding tank. These can hold thousands of gallons of water, and they are usually buried due to their size. Cisterns require a permit to install, and they also require a pump to get the water back out. A \$200 sump pump will provide plenty of water pressure. In much of Europe, cisterns are required by law, and many households use the collected water to operate toilets in addition to watering the garden.



TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

BRINGING HOUSEPLANTS INDOORS

It is once again time to bring houseplants indoors, but make sure insect problems don't come in with your plants. There are a number of things to do to make sure this doesn't happen.

Start with rinsing off the leaves and branches with a sharp stream of water. This will dislodge most insects and give the plant a clean start indoors. It also helps to spray the leaves and stems thoroughly with insecticidal soap to further ensure that the plant is free of bugs.

Pests can also get into the house through the soil in the pot. If your plant needs to be repotted, this is a good time to do it so the old soil can be discarded and replaced. Clean out the pot thoroughly and gently rinse all the old soil off the plant's roots. Mound fresh potting soil in a cone in the bottom of the pot and spread the plant's roots around the cone. Cover the roots with soil so that the soil comes up to the place where the roots join the stem. Do not cover the stem with soil. Water the soil well and put in a bright spot indoors.

If the plant doesn't need to be repotted, use disulfoton granules (also called Di-Syston) in the soil. This insecticide will spread through the soil and will also be absorbed by the plant to protect it from insects and spider mites for thirty days. An insecticide that is labeled for use as a soil drench will also rid the soil of pests. Imidacloprid or Merit is good, but it will not protect against spider mites.

Once you have brought your plant inside, keep it away from plants that did not go outdoors for a few weeks. This way if pests get through your defenses they will not be able to infest your other plants.

GARDEN CALENDAR

- The first frost of the season can occur any time now. Watch weather forecasts and protect tender plants whenever the predicted overnight low is below 38°F.
- Dig out tender bulbs like cannas, calla lilies, dahlias, begonias, caladiums and gladiolus as soon as the leaves turn yellow or brown.
- Trees and shrubs can still be planted as their roots will grow until the soil temperature goes below 40°F.
- Fertilize trees and shrubs after the leaves fall so the roots store the nutrients for use in the spring.
- Plant spring-blooming bulbs like wildlife resistant daffodils. Try winter aconite (*Eranthus*) for early blooms.
- Keep your gardens looking neat by cutting back perennials when the leaves turn brown.
- Leave a few perennials with interesting seed heads standing over winter. They look beautiful with a coating of snow.
- Houseplants receive less light this time of year. Water them sparingly and do not fertilize them until April. If the inner and lower leaves are turning yellow and dropping, you are watering too much.
- Autumn leaf color is near its peak now. Take time to enjoy the show before the leaves are on the ground.
- Prepare new beds by turning over the soil or layering newspapers and mulch. Add organic material (up to 1/3 by volume) and any other soil amendments as needed.
- Have a safe and happy Halloween!



ROGER S. BOLGER HAS OVER TEN YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL HORTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND HAS GARDENED ALL HIS LIFE IN NORTHEAST OHIO. HE HAS GIVEN DOZENS OF GARDENING TALKS AND SPECIALIZES IN WOODY PLANTS, PERENNIALS, TURF, ENTOMOLOGY, INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT, ORGANIC GARDENING, PONDS AND BACKYARD WILDLIFE.

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