

WATER ON THE ALLOTMENTS

Water is a constant requirement for living plants. It is used to carry mineral nutrients to leaf and stem, to distribute foodstuffs to all parts of the plant and to maintain what might be termed the pressure of growth forces. Excess water is constantly being lost through the plant by transpiration and elsewhere by evaporation. Insufficient water leads to wilting, a loss of growth and eventually the plant's death, so it is important to supply sufficient water to your crops.

With these points in mind what is there that you can do as a plot holder to help conserve water.

Below are ten points that may help you to maintain your allotment to a high standard with the minimum amount of water.

1. Use a water butt to collect any rainwater, position it close to your shed so with the use of a length of gutter and a piece of drainpipe water can be collected from the shed roof. It is important to cover the butt to avoid algae growth. When available! soft rainwater is undoubtedly best for plants.
2. Mulch fruit and other long term crops; a good thick layer of mulch helps to conserve water but it also helps prevent weed growth. Well rotted manure or garden compost, even straw or grass clippings, can be used. From some crops, such as strawberries, it may be appropriate to plant through a layer of black polythene pegged down to the soil. Make sure that the soil is well watered before mulching.
3. When cultivating your allotment incorporate plenty of organic matter into the soil as this will help retain moisture in the ground.
4. When growing 'hungry' crops, such as beans, sweet peas, etc., dig a good deep trench and fill the bottom with any type of organic matter, even old damp newspaper will do before backfilling. This will help to act as a reservoir for these plants.
5. Grow crops that do not require excess watering, for instance many herbs such as Sage and Rosemary come from Mediterranean climates and can survive fairly dry conditions.
6. If you grow plants in tubs or containers incorporate a water retentive gell into the planting compost. Stand pots, containers and grow bags on trays to catch any water that drains through, this water can then be recycled.
7. When choosing a watering can pick one that is well balanced and not too heavy to carry when full, 7 to 9 litres (1½ to 2 gallons) should be all right. Polythene cans are shorter lived than metal ones but are inexpensive and with reasonable care should last for several years. Buy two roses (perforated heads), a fine one for watering seedlings and a coarse one for general purpose watering.

8. When you do water, it is better to pick one section of the allotment and water thoroughly to some depth. A thorough soaking at weekly intervals is much better for the plant than a daily sprinkling of water as this will encourage plants to grow deeper and search for their own water. It is best to water early in the morning, particularly in greenhouses, so plants are surface dry at night. This helps to keep diseases down.

9. If watering has to be curtailed because of a water shortage, the addition of a dilute liquid feed to the water used makes it more of an immediate benefit to the struggling plant and less water will go further.

10. Regular hoeing of cultivated areas not only reduces competition for water from weeds but breaks the soil capillaries and therefore reduces water evaporation from the surface of the soil.

If you take note of these points and are careful with the use of water it will still be possible to grow a wide range of crops through the driest of summers. It is these battles with nature that are amongst the things that makes gardening so enjoyable.