

GARDENERS DELIGHT

*Marion Fenn wrote her article before the recent wet weather,
but the ground is still dry so her advice is still timely*



Since I last wrote we have had no rain except for a lovely drop this morning. Hooray, but why on a Friday when it is school allotment day? Our skins are waterproof so we will go ahead if we possibly can. Somehow the weeds keep going despite the drought and need removing. On the whole, the allotment site is looking productive, but these long, dry, hot spells seem to be the cause of things now, so we need to think about drought tolerant plants and drought management.

This takes me back to my childhood and Dad saying, "Where there are stones there is moisture" (we can put stones on top of pot soil and near plants) and pouring a watering can or two of bath water out of the window (we can use grey water so long as it has no bleach nor disinfectant).

Thank you to everybody who donated to the Falkland School fete allotment plant stall. I was given some cleome plants which is drought-tolerant, also known as bee spider-flower or bee plant. It's edible (good source of protein) and can self-seed. Obviously, a useful plant in our changing climate but maybe an acquired taste to the palate of those used to a western diet. There are plenty of recipes online, but masses of leaves needed!

The word drought makes us think of deserts and sun-baked countries suffering from months of baking sun and no rainfall but unfortunately times seem to be changing and hosepipe bans are becoming more frequent in the UK. Water is a precious resource.

Where possible every gardener should have water butts to harvest any rain that does fall. If you do decide to water your allotment, the best time of day is during the cool of the morning or evening. Water the roots of the plant and concentrate the watering to once or twice a week, as opposed to giving your plants frequent light showers, otherwise you'll encourage the roots of the plant to seek water near the surface of the soil, as opposed to deep down in the earth. Watering in the early morning will also make the water available to the plants throughout the day so that the plants will be able to deal better with the heat of the sun.

It is not true that watering in the morning will make the plants susceptible to scorch – few areas in the world get sun that is intense enough for water droplets to scorch the plants; the water droplets would be evaporated in the heat long before they could focus the sunlight.

The second best time to water a vegetable garden is in the late afternoon or early evening. This cuts down on evaporation and allows the plants several hours without sun to take up water into their system. Be careful to make sure that the leaves have a little time to dry before night comes. This is because damp leaves at night encourage fungus problems, such as powdery mildew or sooty mold, which can harm your vegetable plants.

We have had a few rehearsals now so should prepare for drought conditions and hosepipe bans. Ensure that your soil is fertile and contains plenty of organic material, which will help it to retain moisture. The condition of your soil is of paramount importance to your crops, as I wrote about earlier in the year. As a rule of thumb, add back into the soil whatever was taken out in the form of humus. This improves the quality of the soil, but also the soil's ability to retain moisture, meaning you won't need to water your plants so frequently (and in some cases not at all). Ensuring that your soil is always covered with a layer of mulch will help to retain moisture and suppress weeds; the mulch could be garden compost, composted manure, leaf-mould, a geo-textile or stones (the larger the better). Keep the top layer of soil hoed to reduce evaporation. Invest in a moisture meter - you will be surprised how much less you will water when you discover the plants can put their roots down to find moisture.

Using a hose unnecessarily causes weeds to germinate and grow everywhere, helps fungal diseases such as blight and rust to spread, and encourages slugs and snails to mobilise and eat the crops. Luckily, they hibernate in the drought! All plants need is a soaking to their roots, sinking a flowerpot, drainpipe or cut off bottle near the plant means water can go accurately to where it is needed. Runner beans are dependent on adequate moisture. It is also good to put water out for the birds and bees.

Did you know that blueberries, azaleas and other acid-loving plants do not tolerate tap water well? If they really do need a drink a drop of vinegar in the water helps.

When planting out your young plants it is always recommended that you water the hole or trench very well, before putting in your seedlings. We call it mudding in. This means the root system of your young plant will have instant access to water, also encouraging them to grow downwards to seek new water supplies, as opposed to waiting for you to come along with a watering can. Once the plant is well established, reduce or cease watering all together depending on the plant.

When choosing plants for your allotment it is a good idea to go for those that originate in a hot climate and so have evolved not needing very much water, or ones where the edible part of the plant grows below the soil – meaning its roots (and the crops) all benefit from deep water.

- Carrots – never water, it will lower the yield
- Potatoes – water only when the flowers have just opened, but otherwise there should be enough moisture in the soil to sustain the plants
- Parsnips – watering doesn't benefit the crop
- Jerusalem artichoke – never water, otherwise you encourage the formation of leaves and not tubers

- Rosemary and Thyme – woody herbs which can withstand dry seasons
- Beetroot – don't over water as this will increase leaf size not root size, but don't allow the soil to dry out completely
- Brussels sprouts – established plants will only require watering during exceptionally dry weather
- Onions – after the plant has been established, they require little watering and never after mid-July as this will delay ripening.

There are some things that definitely need a drop of water regularly - plants in pots, hanging basket, in greenhouses and polytunnels. Tomatoes spring to mind. Tomatoes are so susceptible to pests and diseases but love hot Mediterranean conditions, so may do better outside than in the greenhouse like they did last year. Outdoor grown flavour is incredible. If it's not white fly or blossom-end-rot it's the dreaded blight but growing them inside in grow bags, on large plastic grow-trays with each plant inside a 'plant halo' on the surface of the compost seems best bet. This holds the water (with weak feed additive) feeding it away from the stem encouraging root spread. The tray retains water to prevent the bag drying out. Finally pinch out tomato plants at 5ft tall and cutting off two levels of leaves from the bottom puts them into fruiting mode and reduces their demand for water. This is in addition to regularly removing the side-shoots.

Many flowers, once established, tolerate dry conditions. I encourage the growing of what I call 'open and honest flowers' which are a good source of nectar and pollen for the bees. The vast array of colours of sunflower are attractive to the human eye but many of them are pollen-less so of no use to bees. Most herbs do well in the hot and dry, as well as producing tasty food – the lovely aromas their flowers are attractive to bees as well as being suitable for cut flowers. With a bit of careful planning we can all do our bit for the environment. Flowers and bees are a perfect match. Bees gather nectar and pollen enabling plants to reproduce. In turn, pollen feeds baby bees, and nectar is turned into honey to be enjoyed by the bees and you - everyone's happy.

