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## The Mystery of Watering: How Much and How Often

Wouldn't we love a simple answer to the question of how much to water and how often? Unfortunately, it doesn't exist. Fortunately though, there are guidelines we can all use to help us determine watering schedules for our plants. Read on for valuable watering tips.

### Tip No. 1: Get to know your soil

You'll understand how your soil absorbs water if you get down and dirty by pushing a soil probe (any smooth rod) into the ground soon after watering. The probe should slide easily through the soil to the typical root zone for the plants you are watering:

- Lawn and Garden: 6-12"
- Shrubs: 12-24"
- Trees: 18-36"

The simple soil probe test will help you determine how long you need to irrigate for water to penetrate to the root zone. Watering deeper than the typical root zone will waste water.

### Tip No. 2: Get to know your plants

Knowing what plants are in your landscape will give you clues as to how often to water. Water needs of thirsty plants such as cottonwoods and aspens vary greatly from those of arid-adapted plants such as yucca and rabbit brush. Once you've identified your plants use the plant catalog at [www.mortimer-nursery.com](http://www.mortimer-nursery.com) or Sunset Western Garden Book as resources to find out how much water your plants need. If you don't know what plants are in your landscape and identifying plants sounds like a chore to you (sounds like fun to us!), then rely on your nifty soil probe (see Tip No. 1): water when your soil probe won't penetrate the ground more than 3 – 4".

### Tip No. 3: Water Widely

A plant's root zone can extend 1.5 – 4 times as wide as its canopy. However, moisture and nutrients are drawn primarily from the soil at the drip line – the area where rain water drips from the furthest branches. Therefore, the drip line is the optimum place to water so remember to move your drip emitters as your plants grow!

### Tip No. 4: Watch the Weather

Although this one seems obvious it's easy to forget to adjust your irrigation depending on the weather. Purchase a rain gauge to help you determine if there's been enough rainfall for your plants – if so, skip the next scheduled

irrigation. If it's hot, dry AND windy then your plants might need extra irrigation. Automatic irrigation systems are convenient but they are most effective when we remember to adjust them with changes in weather.

**Tip No. 5: Water Deeply**

It is best to water deeply and less frequently. A general rule for mature, established plants is to water trees and shrubs no more than once a week and arid-adapted plants every 2 weeks or less (consider weaning the most drought tolerant completely off supplemental irrigation).

**Tip No. 6: Mulch is a Good Thing**

Preventing water from evaporating into our dry air will help reduce the frequency of watering. You can keep moisture in the soil by applying a 3 – 4" layer of organic or inorganic (rock) mulch around a plant's root zone.

**Tip No. 7: Too Much or Too Little Water?**

You might be under-watering if the older leaves turn yellow or brown and newer leaves wilt. You might be over-watering if the newer leaves turn light green or yellow.

**Tip No. 8: Actually, a Few Tips**

1. Once or twice a year water three times longer than you normally do to leach salts out of the root zone.
2. Remember to grow your watering zone as your plants grow.
3. Create basins around trees and shrubs to slow run-off
4. Water in early morning while it is cooler and less windy.
5. Consider rainwater harvesting!

Information for this article was derived from "Watering Trees and Shrubs: Simple techniques for efficient landscape watering" published by Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona.