

TOP TEN WAYS WE HOME GARDENERS WASTE WATER!

by Bob Dailey,
Montgomery County Master Gardener
gardeninginthewoodlands.com



*L to r: How much water are you wasting (and contributing to our bayou problems)?
One type of irrigation system. Are colored mulch okay?*

10. I can plant anything I want . . .

Of course you can. However, many tropical plants that need a lot of water were not meant to grow here. Plants that thrive in northern climates generally require colder weather. Our area gets about 46 inches a year of rain. Native plants were here before humans arrived and thrived without additional water. Many more plants have. Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center and Texas EarthKind have extensive recommendations.

9. I can put my plants anywhere . . .



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Some plants do well in shade or partial shade. Some only thrive with six to eight hours of sun. And some do well "in between." Some start out small but get really big. Before buying, find out growth patterns, sun requirements, water needs and best soil types. Putting plants in an unsuitable site is a prescription for dead, diseased, or stunted plants.

8. Dirt is dirt. All I have to do is stick something in the ground and it grows . . .

"Never put a \$10 plant in a \$1 hole." Texas A&M Soil Laboratory will test soil for a minimal fee. Follow instructions and amend your soil. Good organic compost is the best amendment for poor soil. Good soil helps hold water (up to three quarts per cubic foot), requiring less watering.

7. I water my plants every day when it's hot. They look wilted in the afternoon . . .

In very hot weather, most plants close their stomata (pores on the undersides of the leaves that release gas and water). This can give the plant a wilted look. Good gardeners wait until early evening to see if plants open up again. Watering plants every day could encourage fungal diseases, insect damage, or root rot.

6. Mulch is mulch. Red or black mulch looks really good on my beds . . .

Colored mulch is probably one of the worst things a gardener can use. It's full of dyes, can be made from treated lumber, contains heavy metals and in some areas, high levels of poisons, such as arsenic. It could also exacerbate insect and disease problems. Use a good organic mulch instead. Mulch helps soil retain moisture, so less water is needed for irrigation. Mulch also keeps the soil at more constant temperature, reducing stress on plants and prevents weeds. Good organic mulch also decomposes over time and adds nutrients to the soil.

5. I love to water my garden in the afternoon when it's really hot. That's when the plants need water the most . . .

Watering during the heat of the day ensures that a lot of water is lost through evaporation. The best time to water is in the early morning hours, when it's cooler. There is a great deal of evidence emerging now that watering before daylight may be the very best time to irrigate.



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4. The best way to water my flower beds is with a sprinkler system . . .

The best way to water any bed is with a drip irrigation system. Sprinklers cast a lot of water on the leaves and stems of plants, giving rise to insect damage and disease. Also, drip irrigation uses between 30 and 60 percent LESS water than sprinklers, bringing water directly down into the root system, keeping it in the soil and not allowing it to evaporate into the air as do sprinklers. Drip is also relatively inexpensive to install.

3. My plants need a lot of water. The more I water them, the healthier they are . . .

Too much water on a plant can be worse than too little. Overwatering encourages the plant's roots to grow closer to the surface. The closer to the surface the roots grow, the more susceptible to diseases and pests they become. Also overwatering can kill beneficial microorganisms in the soil, leach out necessary nutrients and cause roots to rot. Watering plants deeply and infrequently will force them to grow strong, healthy root systems.

2. If I water too much, some of the water goes into the street. But it's only a small amount of water and does not matter in the scheme of things . . .

Actually, it does. Fifty to 75 percent of all drinking water used in most municipal areas goes to watering lawns and gardens. In dry summer months that can increase to 80 percent or more. Of that amount, at least 50 percent is lost through runoff. And remember that run-off is wasted water. Neither the lawn nor the plants derived any benefit from it. The only thing that run-off raises is the water bill.

1. I need to water my lawn at least every other day in the summer . . .

Actually, studies at Texas A&M, Texas Tech and many other agricultural universities in the south that specialize in warm season grasses, conclude that turf like St. Augustine requires no more than an inch of water a week, even in the hottest, driest months. If it rained an inch during any given week, the grass would require no additional water. Too much water will actually create a shorter root system, decrease the lawn's ability to fight off infection, and increase the danger of take-all patch and other diseases.

Details on the 2015 Wildscapes Workshop and Plant Sale: <http://npsot.org/wp/houston/>

Contact Bob through his blog: gardeninginthewoodlands.com