



Watering a Vegetable Garden

The Basics

One of the most common mistakes made by gardeners is incorrect watering, and a great number of plant problems are directly or indirectly a result. In Western Washington, the biggest problem is under watering. Many people assume we are in a rainy climate and watering is unnecessary, or that a light sprinkling will do in dry times. Both of these notions are wrong.

Most plant growth takes place from May to September. Although we get plenty of rain during the winter, these months are quite dry in our region. Vegetable gardens need about an inch of water each week during the growing season. If rainfall is not sufficient, this must be applied through irrigation.

To determine when and how much to water, dig into the soil and see/feel where the moisture level is. Soil should never be wet on the surface and moist an inch or two down. Check the soil just after watering and several hours, or the next day, to see how fast the water seeps to what depth in the soil. Take this seepage into account for future watering decisions.

Seeds and seedlings need moisture closer to the surface than mature plants, so they need more frequent watering. Once plants are established, less frequent, deep watering with dry periods between helps grow deep roots. Plants encouraged to root deeply are more drought tolerant and require less care than shallow-rooted ones.

Some crops are naturally more deep rooted than others. Generally, leafy crops, such as lettuce, spinach, and mustards are shallow rooted. Keep the top 2 to 3 inches of soil moist. The same is true for onions and their relatives, such as leeks, garlic, and shallots. Root crops, such as beets, carrots, potatoes, and radishes, should be kept evenly moist (no wet-dry cycles) or they develop tough zones.

Watering Techniques

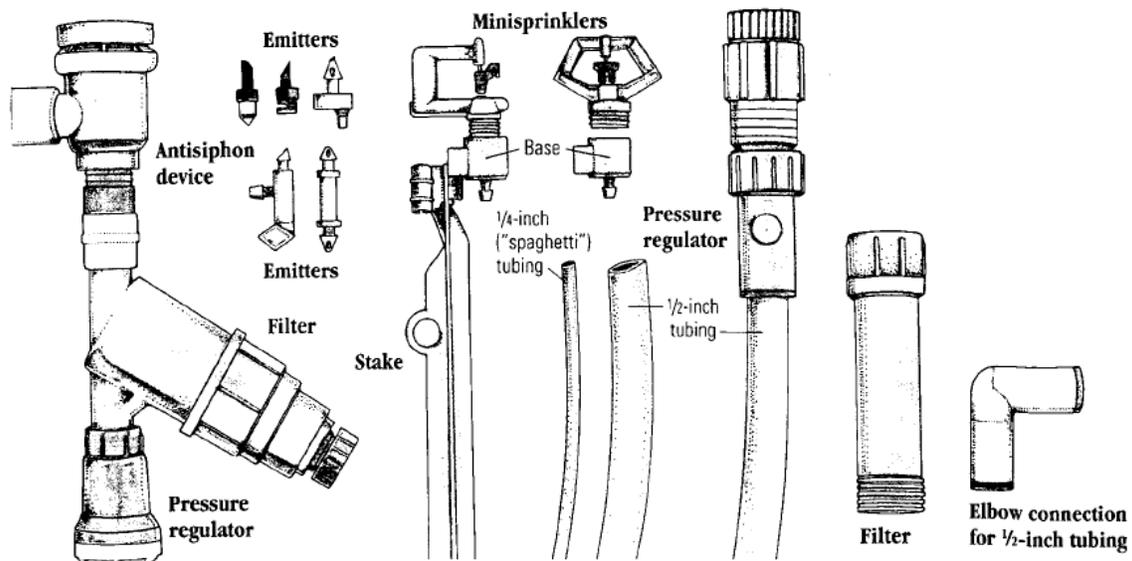
Water Can: can be very time consuming. However, watering each plant by hand allows you to target and evaluate individual patches of soil and the spout ensures the water goes straight to the roots.

Overhead Watering: using a hose and sprinkler is the most common and least effective. If you must use, try a set sprinkler connected to a timer.

Soaker Hose: a great and inexpensive alternative; they “sweat” water through millions of pores along the entire length of the hose. They allow almost no evaporation, can be hooked up to a timer, are easily buried under mulch and require little upkeep

Drip Irrigation: is the most effective of all watering systems for gardens and containers. Mini-tubes extend from a main line with a variety of emitters to release water as needed for each plant. Water is dispersed at low pressure and can be set on a timer. Kits are available.

Components of a Drip Irrigation System



Watering Tips

- To reduce evaporation, water during the cool parts of the day. Try not to water during windy times.
- To help prevent disease, water in the morning or early enough in the evening so the foliage can dry before nightfall. Always water tomatoes, peppers and squash at the base, not with overhead sprinklers.
- Avoid over watering, which may leach nutrients from the root zone.
- Remove weeds that take needed water from your vegetables
- Better to water for a longer time, less frequently.

Prepared by WSU-Pierce County Master Gardener

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