



actsmart[®]

creating a water efficient garden: lawns and garden beds

Creating the perfect balance between healthy plant growth and effective water use is a challenge in our hot, dry climate. Soil improvement, mulching, suitable plant choices and adopting efficient watering practices will help grow a wonderful garden using minimal water.

Important steps towards saving water include:

- Using plant species which have adapted over thousands of years to our local dry conditions
- Designing your garden to group plants with similar water requirements into separate watering zones
- Placing plants in the correct soil and microclimate position to meet their growing needs – the right plants in the right place.

Plant adaptations

Visual characteristics of a plant can give you a general idea of how they have adapted to their climate. Plants that have adapted to hot, dry conditions often have rolled needle-like foliage or hairy or silver/grey foliage. Leathery or very small leaves are other indications of drought adaptation. Some plants have fewer or virtually no leaves, such as cacti; or fleshy leaves that store water, a characteristic of succulent plants.

Plants adapted to higher rainfall areas often have soft, dark green leaves, varying in size but sometimes very large.

Some water saving tips:

- Plant trees and shrubs where they create shade and windbreaks to reduce evaporation.
- Take advantage of sheltered spots to grow sensitive plants, particularly out of the hot summer winds.
- Choose water efficient plants.
- New selections of Australian grasses and strappy leafed plants such as *Lomandra* and *Dianella* are waterwise plants.
- Plant low water-using plants in areas that tend to be dry, such as under eaves.
- Put moisture loving plants in low-lying and sheltered areas.
- Control weeds which compete with garden plants for water.
- Many vegetables are high water-use plants that need a sunny position. Root vegetables are generally less demanding and can be grouped separately from those that use more water.
- Remember to continually improve your soil (see **The importance of soil** fact sheet).



Watering habits and techniques

Choosing appropriate plants and improving your soil are two effective ways to decrease the amount of water your garden needs. The **Irrigation methods** fact sheet will help you choose the best method of watering your garden.





Watering techniques for gardens

Pulse watering

Canberra's unimproved clay soils often absorb water at a very slow rate. If hand watering, water each section of your garden two or three times, waiting until all water is absorbed before applying more.

Soaking for lengthy periods

A slow, deep soak for a few hours once a week rather than shallow watering daily encourages a deeper, more resilient root system. Newly planted shrubs and trees, however, need regular water for the first few months to prevent surface feeder roots from drying.

Garden planning

If you are planning a new garden, invest some time in getting to know its microclimate, particularly its exposure to sun and hot summer northerly and westerly winds, and how these affect plant choice and placement.

Plant selection

The Canberra Plant Selector can help you choose garden plants on the basis of their water requirements, sun, shade and frost tolerances. This free online tool can be found at www.actsmart-plantselector.com.au

Plant nurseries and local garden centres are also a good source for advice on water efficient plants suitable for gardens in your area.

Looking after a lawn efficiently

Lawn plays a key aesthetic and recreational role in gardens.

Warm season grasses can survive on relatively infrequent watering if grown in good soil that fosters deep root systems.

Watering your lawn infrequently but deeply encourages deep root penetration and increased drought tolerance.

There are a number of native, drought-tolerant cool-season grasses that can be used to create a native lawn. Contact your local nursery for further information.

Tips on watering lawns:

- The better the soil beneath your lawn the deeper its roots and the less water is needed to keep it healthy.
- Only water your lawn if it is showing signs of stress, such as losing colour (in summer) or if the grass wilts or leaf blades roll or fold in half lengthways. Another way to tell if your lawn needs watering is to step on it. If the footprints remain visible after you have stepped on it, it needs a good soak.
- Use cyclic watering techniques if your soil is heavy or compacted.
- Don't mow lawns too short. Mow one-third of the leaf blades each time, keeping blade length to 50 mm. Longer leaf blades will shade the root zone, reduce evaporation and assist deep rooting.
- Brown patches on grass may suggest a compacted or water repellent soil. Aerate your lawn regularly to ensure that rain or irrigation penetrates efficiently and evenly. You can also treat this problem with a soil wetting agent.

For more ideas, tips and information
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