



# KING HENRY'S WALK garden

## WATERING WISELY

### Avoid sprinkling

A key to conserving water is to avoid any temptation to sprinkle. Aim to get water down to the roots. This will encourage plants to grow their roots deep down into the soil to search for moisture. If there is a drought divide the plot into areas. Soak one area thoroughly a day at a time and leave it for a week. Make a hole about 15cm/6 inches deep to check that the water has penetrated deeply enough.

A rough guide to quantity for vegetables is 11 litres per square metre or 2 gallons per square yard and twice as much for newly planted fruit trees in the first summer.

Water in the cool of the evening or early morning to avoid evaporation.

### Don't over water

Overwatering can produce soft growth that is attractive to pests and make plants susceptible to cold and rotting off. Always water at the base to prevent fungal problems.



### Mulch

Wait for a good rain if possible. It is important that the soil is really soaked first as the idea is to trap the water in. Well rotted manure or compost makes ideal mulches as the worms will take them down gradually to enrich the soil – a double benefit. Composted bark chippings and mushroom compost are available to buy, but leaf mould, grass clippings, straw or even thick sheets of newspaper or cardboard will also do the job of slowing down evaporation. If you are growing in containers, a layer of pebbles or gravel looks good and keeps the soil moist. Clean straw is ideal for strawberries (unsurprisingly) and will prevent ‘mud splash’ spoiling them.

### Keep weeds down

Keep weeds down as they drink up precious water.

## Collect rain water

Collect as much water as you can in water butts. It is not only economical but it is the best water for all plants except seedlings. Tap water is better for them as it is sterile.

## Protect against wind

(not a problem at King Henry's Walk)

Wind desiccates and tears, dehydrating plants and putting them under stress.

## Avoid digging in hot weather

As you turn the soil over, moisture evaporates. Wait till autumn if you can.

## Add in organic matter

When you do dig, add in lots of organic matter as it helps to retain moisture in the soil.

## Water retaining granules for containers

If you are planting containers use water retaining granules. They are quite expensive but you only need tiniest quantities. They cut down watering by 70%. Don't overfill the pots with compost. Leave enough room for at least 2.5cm/1 inch for a residue of water at the top.

## Shade seedlings

in order to slow down drying out by evaporation.

## Make moats, sink pipes

Make channels and moats to direct rain to plants that need a lot of water. Sink a section of pipe or a flower pot into the soil next to hungry feeders to direct water right down into the roots.

## Needs of different plants

Young transplants with tiny roots and germinating seeds are an exception to the no sprinkling rule. They may need light watering with a fine rose as much as twice a day. Alternatively, put the pots on a tray half filled with gravel and water, or on capillary matting (available in garden centres) so the plants soak up moisture gradually. If you are going away put any plants in pots on a piece of capillary matting with one end in a bucket of water.

Vegetables grown for their leaves should never be allowed to dry out.

Fast growers – tomatoes, courgettes and marrows – need plenty of water throughout their short growing season. Avoid using cold water on semi-tropical plants. Let it get to the ambient temperature.

Research from the National Vegetable Research Station shows that plants have 'moisture sensitive' stages of growth. The usual response to watering is leaf growth. This is ideal for the leafy brassicas and salad leaves but not for legumes. Peas and bean are best kept on the dry side until they flower. At this point they could do with some help as activity slows down.

Edibles grown for their roots, pods or fruits need steady but not excessive water until they start to fruit or flower. A good watering at this point will produce a better crop. Potatoes profit from a good dousing when they are the size of marbles.

All fruit needs plenty of water when it's being productive in fruit or flower. Newly planted and wall trained fruit trees in particular need watering throughout the first summer until they get their roots down to the water table.

TIP: Don't judge the moisture of the soil by looking at the surface. It may well be dry on top but nice and damp below ground.

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