



Making Every Drop Count

Water-saving tips for your yard or garden from the National Wildlife Federation

During summer months, Americans use twice as much water as they do during other times of the year. Watering lawns and gardens accounts for the vast majority (50 to 70 percent) of average household use. However, by combining conservation practices with efficient landscape design, homeowners can save natural resources, time, and money, and help to prevent our aquifers and rivers, which wildlife depend on for survival, from going dry due to over-pumping. Here are a few tips from NWF on how to make every drop count in your yard or garden:

Garden Design

- Group plants with similar moisture requirements close together, matching them with appropriate yard conditions—sunny, shady, damp, dry. Creating zones for plants with different drought tolerances allows you to target watering only on the vegetation that needs it.
- Whenever possible, cultivate plants that require the greatest amounts of moisture in depressions or areas that receive water from slopes or downspouts.
- Shelter thirsty species from the drying effects of prevailing winds by positioning drought-tolerant plants, including trees and shrubs, to the north and west of them. Windbreaks such as fences may also be used.
- Help keep water in your yard and prevent wasteful runoff by using porous materials, such as wood chips, gravel, crushed stone and permeable pavers, for driveways, walkways and patios. Build basins around trees and shrubs.

Plant Selection

- Focus on perennials that are adapted to your microclimate, specifically plants that are native to your area. They require less moisture and are naturally resistant to local plant diseases and pests. They also are more wildlife-friendly, providing the best overall food sources for backyard birds and other animals. (Ask your local native plant society or extension agent which plants are native to your area and which will thrive in your habitat.)
- When choosing plants, keep in mind that smaller ones require less water to become established.

Soil Preparation

- Determine what kind of soil is found in your yard and improve it if plant needs dictate. (Some natives, for example, actually thrive in poorly drained soils.) Water moves quickly through sandy soil; it penetrates clay soils much more slowly. The cure for either condition: organic matter. Adding compost, peat moss or shredded leaves improves the texture and water-filtering capacity of soil, which encourages the healthy growth of plant roots.

Lawns and Turf Alternatives

- Don't mow your lawn too short. Soil shaded by taller blades of grass holds moisture longer, reducing root stress.
- Leave grass clippings on the lawn. They contain valuable nutrients that minimize the need for additional, more expensive fertilizers that can run off of your lawn and pollute streams and rivers.
- Avoid using grass as a fill-in material and placing turf in areas that are difficult to mow and water properly, such as steep inclines and isolated patches along sidewalks and driveways.
- Consider alternatives to the traditional lawn, which can be one of the most labor-intensive, water-guzzling types of "garden" you can have. Good alternatives include planting native trees, understory plants, shrubs, and ground covers.

Efficient Irrigation

- Water infrequently, deeply and thoroughly. This prevents wasteful runoff and encourages deeper root growth; plants with deep roots develop greater resistance to dry spells. In general, water should penetrate 4 to 6 inches down into the soil, which is the equivalent of 1 inch of water on the surface. Measuring the amount of water that collects in a rain gauge will help you determine moisture needs.
- Avoid watering your lawn during the hottest part of the day when up to 60 percent of moisture can be lost to evaporation.
- Don't water on windy days. Water is lost to evaporation or can be blown away from plants.
- Consider installing a drip irrigation system, which ensures that up to 90 percent of the water you apply to your garden is actually available to your plants. (Sprinklers are half as efficient.) Drip irrigation minimizes evaporation loss and keeps the areas between plants dry, helping to limit weed growth. (Weeds are invasive nonnative plants that outcompete natives, spread rampantly and drastically reduce natural biological diversity.)
- Use an automatic shutoff device with any system to prevent overwatering. A wind-up timer, for instance, may be attached directly to a faucet.
- Regularly inspect for and repair equipment leaks.
- Capture rainwater from downspouts in cisterns or rain barrels for landscape use. Cover the containers with lids or fine mesh fabric to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. (Note: Collection is not a legal practice in all communities.)

General Maintenance

- Apply organic mulch, such as bark, wood chips, shredded leaves or straw, to planting beds. Mulch helps the soil retain moisture, discourages the growth of weeds and provides plants with essential nutrients.
- Remove weeds, which rob water and nutrients from nearby plants. Rather than pull them, dig carefully to remove as much of their root systems as possible. Pulling weeds disturbs the surrounding soil, encouraging new weed growth.

To learn other ways to practice resource conservation in your yard, visit www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat.

Protecting wildlife through education and action since 1936, the [National Wildlife Federation](http://www.nwf.org) is America's conservation organization creating solutions that balance the needs of people and wildlife now and for future generations.