

# Helpful hints for Waterwise gardeners



# A startling statistic on water use in the garden

Victorian gardeners use somewhere in the vicinity of 406,800,000 litres of water per day

To help reduce this water consumption, South East Water and the Nursery & Garden Industry Victoria are supporting the "Waterwise in the Garden" initiative.

## **South East Water**

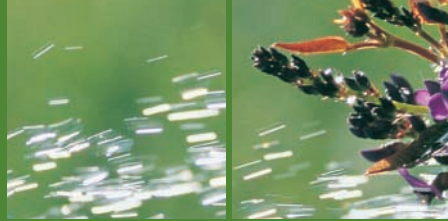
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# Three major benefits

## Waterwise gardening... benefiting the individual gardener and the community



There are three major benefits to being Waterwise in your garden:

### 1 The Waterwise gardener will save money

Governments throughout Australia are reviewing the way in which we pay for water.

In the future, when we save water we will save money. By applying the ideas from the “Waterwise in the Garden” initiative, you have the potential to cut your outside water use by up to 50% while still maintaining a green, pleasant and rewarding garden.

### 2 A Waterwise garden is a low maintenance garden

With smaller lawn areas, effective use of mulching and landscaping and a properly designed irrigation system, Waterwise gardens are often a lot less work than conventional gardens.

### 3 A Waterwise garden is more natural and helps to save our environment

A Waterwise gardener helps to save our environment by:

- reducing use of fertilisers and chemicals
- reducing water run-off to the stormwater system, which runs straight out into our waterways, and
- helping to delay the need for further dams.

# 7 secrets from the experts to help your garden thrive using less water

Some 40% of household water use in Victoria is in the garden. The “7 Secrets of Waterwise Gardening” have been developed in consultation with some of Australia’s leading garden experts and they are guaranteed to help you cut your water consumption and your household water bills.

By following these secrets you’ll cut your garden water use whilst still maintaining a green, pleasant, rewarding and successful garden.

## 1 Planning and preparation...

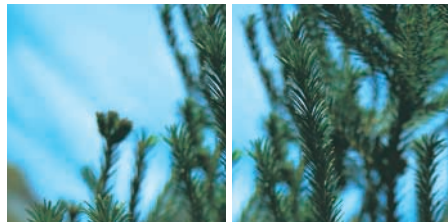
Careful planning is the key to saving water in the garden. Here is how:

- Group plants with similar water needs in specific areas for more efficient watering
- Set windbreaks to protect delicate species and to reduce water needs.

## 2 Improve the soil...

Soil moisture content is vital to the health of any plant. Most sandy soils have a low organic matter level, which means that water, and nutrients pass rapidly through the soil.

You can improve the organic matter of your soil by adding manure, compost and/or peat, etc. A high level of organic matter in your soil will improve plant growth, use less water and fertilisers and promote healthier plants.



## 3 Grow the right plants...

When choosing plants, it’s important to not only consider size, shape, function and appearance, but also the amount of water that they will require.

When you choose water efficient plants you are saving money on your water rates as well as helping to create a low maintenance garden.

Many plants, particularly some of our Australian native species, grow and flourish on very little water. Your local nursery or garden centre can offer valuable advice on water efficient plants.

## 4 Reduce grassed areas...

Lawns require more water than other areas of your garden and therefore, offer the best opportunity to help you conserve water and save money. Lawn areas should be designed to be practical and useful and not just used as a “fill-in” area in your garden.

Two ways you can reduce your lawn area are:

- paving
- planting of ground covers.

**The type of grass you choose is also important.**

Some drought resistant grasses include Windsor-green, Santa Anna Bluegrass, Greenlees Park and Wintergreen. Your local nursery can offer valuable advice on water efficient grasses.

## 6 Use more mulch...

A layer of good mulch of at least 75mm thick reduces evaporation from the soil surface by as much as 70%. Mulch also discourages weed growth, prevents erosion and evens out soil temperature variations.

Every part of the garden can be mulched. Ensure that the mulch is kept clear of tree trunks and plant stems to avoid possible fungal problems.

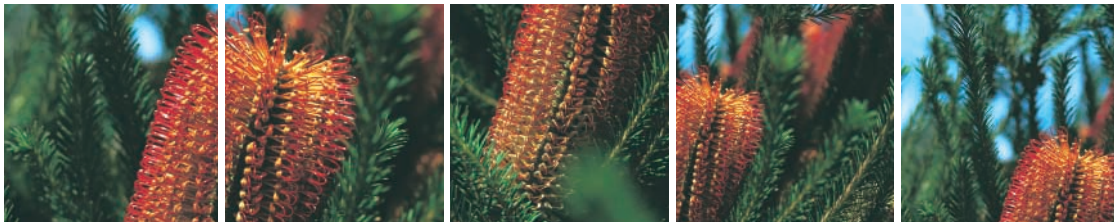
Mulches may be of plant origin like peat or woodchips, or inorganic like gravel, crushed brick or blue metal. All can be used to great effect as a landscape feature.

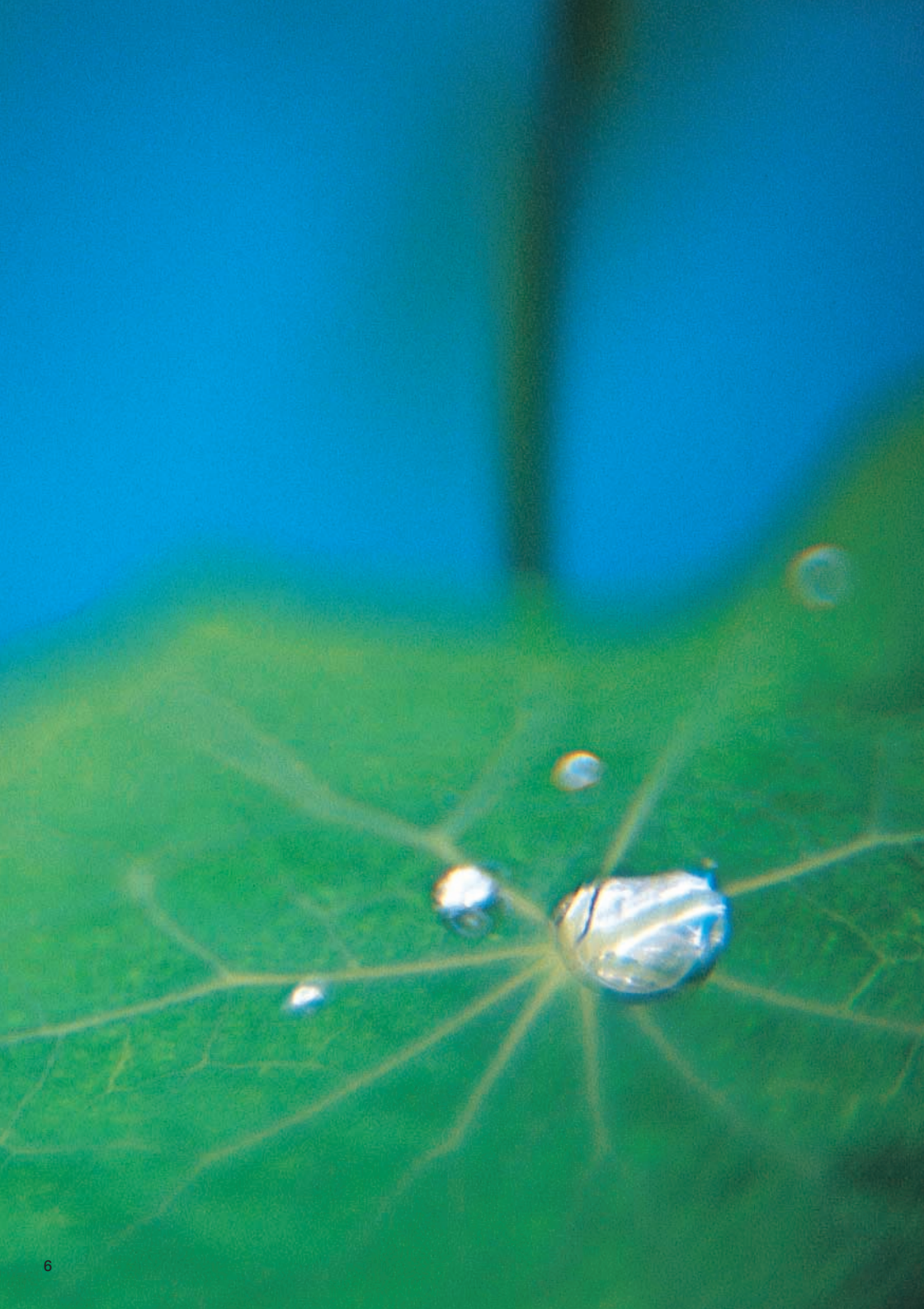
## 5 Water wisely...

The ideal watering system is one, which will deliver water directly to the plant roots in the correct quantities. A lot of water can be saved with an efficient, well-designed watering system. Drippers, tap timers, trigger hoses and micro-irrigation systems should be used to deliver water in the most efficient manner. Your local garden centre or irrigation professional can offer valuable advice.

## 7 Garden maintenance...

The above six secrets will not only lead to a significant reduction in water use but also in the amount of time and effort you spend in your garden. However, a water efficient garden requires regular maintenance to ensure it remains healthy. Your irrigation system should be regularly checked, mulches topped-up and any new planting should be in-line with the planned objective of **saving water**.





# Waterwise gardening at a glance

To help gardeners, this booklet contains the following specific information on how to create and maintain a Waterwise garden.

## **You can have beautiful flowers and still conserve water**

It's still possible to have beautiful flowers in a Waterwise garden. This section provides you with all that you need to know including a list of flowers that flourish in the harsh Australian climate.

## **Saving water, work and money with your existing lawn**

Maintaining your lawn can cost you a lot of money and also eat into your precious gardening time. This section outlines a number of strategies to reduce water consumption and the work that you put into your lawn.

## **Waterwise watering and irrigation systems**

Using the correct irrigation system can help to save a lot of water and work. This section offers a myriad of advice for home irrigating on any budget.

## **How to identify water efficient plants at a glance**

How do you tell a water efficient plant by looking at it? This section gives you all the inside information.

## **Successful pot plants using less water**

With our growing trend towards flat and duplex living, with courtyard and balcony gardens, pot plant gardening is becoming increasingly popular. This section contains six special secrets to successful pot plants, which use less water.

## **Water efficient shrubs**

Shrubs are woody plants, which form the backbone of our gardens as they provide size, texture and colour. This section provides a guide to successfully growing water efficient shrubs.

# You can have beautiful flowers and still conserve water

Flowers provide a lovely splash of colour through the Spring and Summer months, and can be used to brighten up any garden. Though they are generally considered to need a lot of water, you can grow them in a Waterwise garden if you follow these basic principles.

## Prepare your flower bed to minimise water usage

Australian soils are naturally deficient in organic matter; which means they can't hold adequate amounts of either water or nutrients.

Taking the effort to improve the organic matter of your soil will bring enormous benefits to your garden. It will:

- Improve plant growth
- Reduce fertiliser use
- Reduce water use
- Decrease garden maintenance.

Organic matter can be added in many ways. You can:

- Make your own by composting household waste; or
- Purchase it from your local nursery in many different forms including peat and manure.

Soil additives such as soil wetting agents will also help your soil to hold water more effectively.

## Mulch your garden bed

The Australian climate is one of the harshest in the world. Bare soil exposed to the sun loses nutrients and water at a rapid rate. The application of a thick layer of mulch will help to:

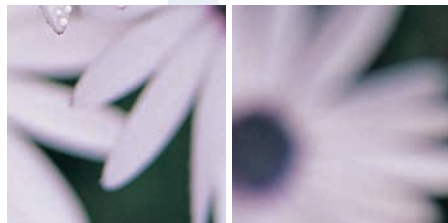
- Retain moisture
- Discourage weed growth
- Prevent soil erosion.

Organic mulches have the additional advantage of breaking down over time, and feeding the soil and your plants.

To prepare a flowerbed you must:

- Improve your soil
- Mulch the whole area first
- Scrape away small areas to plant your seeds in.

**Note:** Beds containing tall bedding plants should be mulched to a depth of 75mm. For lower or spreading plants the mulch should be 50mm thick.



## Plan before you plant

When planting your flower bed choose water efficient flowers (some are listed below) and group your flowering plants together in a suitable area, which can be watered independently from other areas of the garden.

Not all flowers have the same water requirements, so try to group flowers with similar needs together. Your local nursery industry professional, can advise you on the water needs of different types of plants.

## Choosing the right flowers

When gardening in Australia, we should always remember that our climate is probably one of the harshest on earth.

For this reason, we need to choose flowers and plants, which can flourish in these conditions.

Some flowers, which are suitable for Australian conditions, include:

Alyssum, Carnations, Coreopsis, Dimorphotheca, Pimelea, Wild Rosemary, Gazania, Geranium, Marigold, Pelargonium, Verbena, Salmon Correa, Arctosis, Celosia, Cockscomb, Gerbera, Petunia, Creeping Boobialla, Vinca, Portulaca, Asorta 'Winter Pink', Callistemon Little John, Clustered Everlasting, Marguerite Daisy, Mesembryanthemum, Shasta Daisy, Gaillardia and Fringed Health Myrtle.

These plants can be grown in full sun and will perform well with watering every second day. Some may show slight wilting during very hot days, but should make a good recovery once the heat has passed.

**Remember that all flowers will perform better if the guidelines about soil, mulches and watering are followed.**

## Watering your flower beds

Micro-irrigation is the most water-efficient means of watering a flowerbed. A low volume spray or soaker hose can be used to cover the area. Two important things to note:

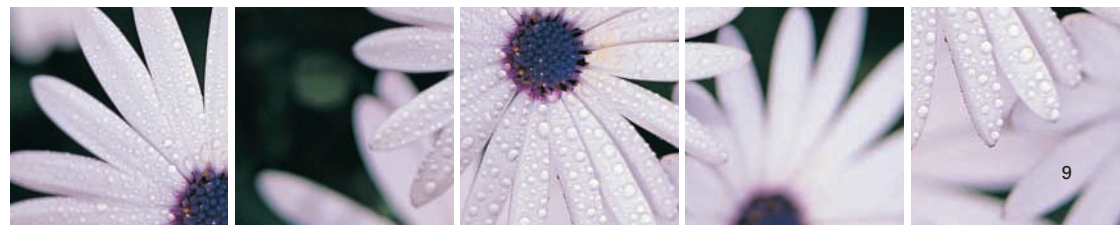
- Cover your irrigation lines with mulch to improve appearances and keep pipes cool
- Water at night or in the early morning to reduce evaporation.

## Fertilising your flower beds

Don't attempt to force the plants on with large amounts of strong fertilisers. This will only produce lush growth, which has a higher water transpiration rate and is more prone to insect and fungal attack.

Manures are excellent fertilisers for flowerbeds, when used in moderation, because of their slow release action and high organic matter content.

Some animal manure is rich in nitrogen, which stimulates leaf growth. These manures may need supplementing with a general-purpose fertiliser.



# Saving water, work and money with your existing lawn

Large backyards and lawns are historically a major part of Australian gardens. But have you ever paused to think just how much it costs to maintain your lawn?

The more that you water your lawn, the more it becomes dependent on you for water, and the more you have to mow it. This can be expensive and take a lot of time and effort.

For this reason, lawns should never be used as a 'fill in'. Hardy ground covers and paving are two of many lower water use alternatives.

**Take a look at your garden to see if you need all the lawn you have. Following are some ways to reduce water use and work with your lawn.**

## Improved watering practices

The most water efficient way to manage a lawn is by giving it just enough to survive. By watering your lawn less frequently, you are ensuring a deeper root system and a healthier lawn as your grass searches for water in the soil.

Only water when the grass shows signs of stress - a loss of bright colour and a slight wilting. At this stage you have 24 to 48 hours to give the lawn a good, *deep* drink of water. (Wet the soil to a depth of 15cm - check the depth of soil moisture by using a moisture probe or a skewer).

How much water you apply and how often you irrigate depends on the type of lawn, type of soil, climate and the time of year.

Your irrigation professional or local nursery will be able to offer you advice on how much water to apply and how often to water your lawn. The right time to water is 5am to 8am in the morning and 5pm to 8pm in the evening to minimise evaporation.

It is also important to be aware of any water restrictions that maybe in place at any given time that may determine when you can water.

**In addition, there is no need to water your lawn in rainy periods when the ground is naturally wet enough. People with automatic watering systems need to pay particular attention to ensure that they are switched off during rainy periods.**

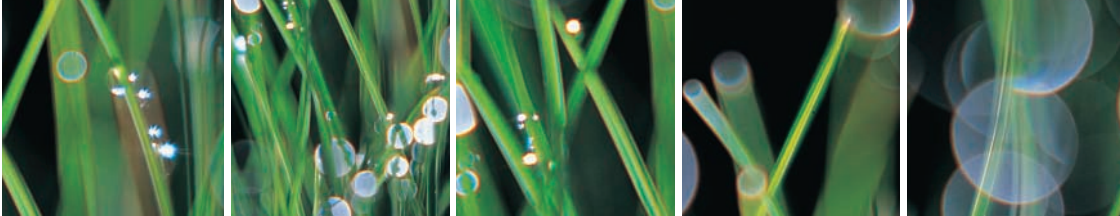
## Watering and sprinkler systems

Old watering systems are often poorly designed and fitted with sprinklers, which can waste water. Some of the common faults are misting, and sprinklers which water lawns and garden beds, but also paving and other surfaces that do not require water.

## Fertilising your lawn

Cutting down on water use means that you can also reduce fertiliser use. Be aware that the directions on fertiliser bags often recommend excess nitrogen use.

Fertilisers with manure content are ideal, as they help maintain the level of organic matter in the soil.



## Mowing

Mowers should be set so that only one third of the leaf area is removed at any one time. This should leave a blade length of some 10mm to 15mm. This amount of leaf protects the soil surface and reduces evaporation. Close mowing causes scalping and exposes the base of the grass and its roots to the sun.

## Soil improvement

Extra organic matter such as manure mixed through the top 15cm of soil, will dramatically improve both the water and nutrient holding capacity of the soil.

## Waterwise tips on establishing a new lawn

There are three ways to establish a lawn: turf rolls; runners; or seed.

Turf rolls offer instant cover and provide the most water efficient means of establishing a lawn in Summer.

However, it is best to establish new lawns during the cooler months of Spring and Autumn. Take advantage of any delay by:

- Removing all weeds from the area
- Improving the soil and drainage
- Mulching the area.

## Choosing a water efficient grass

Grasses such as Couch Grass eg. 'Windsor-green', 'Greenlees Park', 'Santa Anna', 'Kikuya', 'Wintergreen' and Bluegrass have the lowest water demand. They also have a high drought tolerance.

## Converting an unwanted lawn area

Converting unwanted lawn to create a water efficient garden or paved entertainment area is relatively easy. There are two simple ways of killing grass and leaving the area ready:

- Use a herbicide containing the active ingredient glyphosate. Apply the chemical using a string guide to ensure you get complete coverage. This area can be replanted after three weeks
- Block out the light to the area by laying a thick sheet of black polythene over it. After three to six weeks, all the grass will be dead.

The dead thatch can be left as a mulch while new plants are established; or removed and replaced with paving for that new entertainment area.

# Waterwise watering and irrigation systems

There is a wide range of watering systems currently available on the market, ranging from the sophisticated, to the simple hose and sprinkler. No matter which system you use, there are a number of basic rules to follow when using a garden irrigation system.

- Water in the early evening or early morning because less water is lost through evaporation. Never water in the heat of the day. It wastes water and can lead to plant damage from burning.
- Water the roots, not the leaves of your plants. Plants absorb water and nutrients through their root system, so the most efficient way to water is to deliver the water directly to the roots.
- Don't water when it is raining. People with automatic watering systems need to pay particular attention to ensure these systems are switched off during rainy periods.
- Do not water paths or driveways.

**Waterwise irrigation is about delivering the right amount of water at the right time, to the right place.**

How much water you apply and how often you irrigate depends on the type of plants, type of soil, climate and the time of year.

Your irrigation professional or local nursery will be able to offer you advice on how long to water and how often to water your plants.

## Hose and sprinkler users

Gardeners using hoses and sprinklers will find them as efficient as using automatic irrigation systems, simply by planning their watering and sticking to a pattern.

Tips for reducing water use when using a hose and sprinkler include:

- Use a tap timer so you can't over water if you forget to turn off the hose
- Make sure your hose, sprinkler and fittings are in good condition. Repair leaks and tighten up the fittings
- Use a part circle sprinkler close to buildings and roads to avoid over spray onto paving.



## Improving water efficiency with your existing automatic irrigation system

If you already have an automatic system, there are many ways you can save water and still maintain a healthy garden. Some tips include:

- Check the system for nozzle blockages, or to see if foliage is interrupting spray patterns
- Replace nozzles if they are worn
- If you notice a dry patch, put in an extra sprinkler - don't over water the rest to compensate
- Check the operating pressure. The pressure can change over the years and your system may need changes to cope with a lower, or even higher pressure, to remain efficient.

## What to look for when purchasing a new irrigation system

An automatic irrigation system can be a great way of increasing your leisure time, efficiently watering your garden and saving water.

**Here are a few things you should check, which will ensure a trouble-free system and years of water savings.**

- Ensure the person designing the system is an Irrigation Association of Australia (I.A.A.) Member. This is a voluntary industry association, but they can help should any conflict arise

- Look carefully at the plan. It should have separate sections for lawns and gardens. The sprinklers should not water the road, driveway, house or paving
- Get a written quote and buy a multi-program controller, which separates lawns and gardens. Ask for the features of the controller to be fully explained.
- Fit a master valve and ensure someone qualified does the plumbing connection
- Find out the application rate of the different sprinklers used in the system so that you can schedule your controller. Your irrigation specialist can provide this information
- Question the selection of sprinklers. Are they best suited to your application?
- Use micro-irrigation in garden beds and drippers on native plants
- If you are in a windy location, use a large droplet size sprinkler to minimise wind drift

**Don't forget to change the setting each season, for maximum efficiency.**

# How to identify water efficient plants at a glance

Choosing the correct plants is a vital aspect of establishing a water efficient garden. There are many beautiful plants that are well suited to hot climates such as ours.

Some Australian native plants, as well as some of the plants from the Mediterranean, South Africa and the west coast of America have adapted to survive dry conditions. These plants survive dry conditions by:

- Storing water
- Reducing water loss
- Accessing water deep in the soil.

**When you are choosing new plants for your garden please look for the following features.**

## Small leaves

Small leaves are an adaptation to dry and arid conditions. Most water efficient plants have small, tough leaves, often rounded or needle-like, to minimise surface area.

## Light leaf colours

Foliage colour is a good indicator of plant water usage.

High water use plants, which have developed in shady areas, have a soft dark green surface.

Water efficient plants tend to have light green, blue-green or grey-green foliage, which reflects the light, and keeps the leaf cooler thus reducing transpiration.

## Hairy leaves

Hairy leaves are an indication of water efficiency. Hair surrounding the plant pores act like a windbreak, slowing down air movement over the pores, thereby reducing moisture loss.

## Tough surface

Water efficient plants have a tough, hard and sometimes waxy surface to their leaves.

While most moisture is lost through the pores, there is also some loss through the actual leaf surface.

Australian native plants such as Callistemon, Melaleuca and Eucalyptus have these tough surfaces, as do other species of plants like Ceanothus, Rhamphiolepis, Pyracantha and Elaeagnus.

## Strong internal structure

Tender plants wilt in the heat when they cannot take up water fast enough to replace that lost by transpiration.

Though they recover from short periods of wilting, if it is prolonged, the structure of the plant can be damaged.

Water efficient plants have a strong internal skeleton, which prevents this wilting. This combined with reduced transpiration ensures that they can survive extended periods of heat stress.

## Protected “pores”

The leaves of a plant contain small pore like openings called stomata through which most of the moisture is lost through transpiration.

*They can be likened to sweat pores in our skin.*

Water efficient plants have fewer of these pores to protect them and minimise water loss.

Water efficient plants also have most of their stomata on the underside of the leaves where they are less exposed to the sun and wind.

## Internal water sources

Water may be stored in many different parts of a plant including:

- The trunk
- A swollen root system
- In the leaves.

Some examples include:

- **Trunk:** Boab Tree and Barrel cacti
- **Root System:** Kurrajong
- **Leaves:** Pigface, Crassula & Kalanchoe.

## Deep root systems

Many plants can develop very deep root systems, which enable them to reach down into the ground in the search for water.

Some of the native plants develop these extensive root systems which tap into the water table, so that once they are established, they don't need further supplementary watering.

## Need further information on water efficient plants?

**Speak with your local Nursery Industry Professional.**

**They will be able to recommend plants that are native to your area and that are suited to your climate.**



# Successful pot plants using less water

Our modern, busy lifestyle and the growing trend towards units and duplex living in Australia, means that pot plant gardening is becoming increasingly popular.

**The good news is that pot plant gardening is very water efficient. The following simple secrets will help you to develop a successful pot plant garden and still conserve Australia's precious water resources.**

## Potting mix

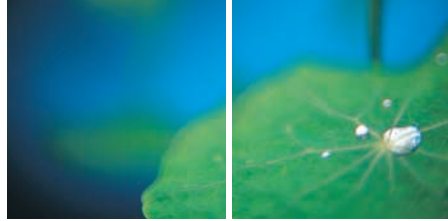
Healthy potted plants begin with the right potting mix. Your potting mix should have a high organic matter content, which allows it to hold water and nutrients for your plant to use.

To get started, choose a good quality potting mix. (Some have been approved by Australian Standards and carry the relevant logo on the bag).

## Soil wetting agents

Soil wetting agents are also very useful in overcoming the common problem of the soil getting so dry that it is difficult to re-wet.

You can pour water on the surface and it just rolls off, or worse still, it appears to soak in but actually only enters at one spot and then runs straight out of the bottom, leaving the soil dry.



Pot plants need to be treated with wetting agents each year.

The simplest method is to dunk them into a prepared solution of a soil wetting agent each Spring.

## Pot style

Whilst unglazed terracotta pots are very fashionable, they have the disadvantage of being a porous material, which allows soil moisture to escape relatively quickly.

**An unglazed terracotta pot should be made moisture proof before planting.**

There are two ways to do this:

- Use a liquid sealant which is simply painted onto the inside of the pot
- Line the inside of the pot with polythene. Make sure that a hole is cut in the polythene to coincide with the drainage hole of the pot.

Hydroponic systems are also water efficient. Though they may use a large liquid mass, the fluid is retained and recycled in the hydroponic process with very little waste.



## Fertiliser

This is an important factor in successful pot plant gardening. Most gardeners apply *too much* fertiliser in the mistaken belief that a fast growing, lush plant is a healthy plant.

Forcing a plant to grow quickly not only increases its water demand but also causes it to be more susceptible to disease.

Regular use of such high nitrogen fertilisers often promotes leaf growth at the expense of flowers. The best pot plants are those, which are fed just enough to maintain their present size.

## Pot size

Make sure your pot is the right size. If it's too small, the plant will be restricted and stressed by lack of room.

If it's too large, your pot will take up more space and water than is necessary and will be difficult to move around. Some plants, azaleas and fuchsias in particular, are prone to diseases like root rot if they are placed in too large a pot. Somewhere between the two extremes is the key.

## Watering requirements

To test whether a pot plant needs a drink or not, simply push your finger into the soil up to the first knuckle joint.

If the soil feels damp at that stage and sticks to your finger, the plant does not need a drink.

Don't worry if your plants wilt a little during the heat of the day. Most plants can cope with this stress.

Ferns are the exception, and must never be allowed to dry out. Drippers are a good way to water pot plants, as they ensure that the water is distributed throughout the soil, rather than soaking through.

## Mulch

Mulching of any of your garden is a great way to reduce water loss through evaporation.

When establishing pot plants, allow 50mm for mulch in your pot. As always, mulch should be kept clear of the stem to avoid possible fungal problems. In a pot, a 25-50mm clearance is fine.

# Water efficient shrubs

Shrubs are woody plants, which form the backbone of our gardens as they provide size, texture and colour. They are found all around the world and have varying water requirements.

Some come from deserts, where they survive extended dry periods, and others from tropical rainforests, where water is continually draining through the soil.

**Here are a few tips on the ways you can help your shrubs to thrive, but still conserve water.**

## Group your shrubs

One of the most effective ways of saving water in the garden is to group your shrubs according to their water needs.

This will mean that you can water everything in the area without over watering your other shrubs.

## Replant your shrubs

Most of the high water use shrubs don't have deep root systems and can be replanted in Winter to an area with shrubs with similar water needs.

Hardy, low water use and drought tolerant plants are more difficult to move, with their deep root systems.

Remember, if you decide to re-organise your garden, make sure you place the very tough shrubs on the exposed side so that they act as a windbreak and protect the more delicate shrubs.

## Improve your soil before planting

Adding organic matter to your soil prior to planting will improve its moisture and nutrient holding capacity. Save water by simply adding a 20cm bed of organic mixture to your garden.

## Mulching the area

Mulching your garden is an excellent way to reduce water loss through evaporation.

A 75mm layer of mulch spread over a garden bed will conserve water as well as:

- Feed the plants
- Encourage earthworms
- Restrict weed growth
- Improve the soil
- Keep the roots cool.

It's best to install a watering system, which waters the roots of your shrubs, rather than the mulch. If the mulch is watered too regularly, you will need to add manure to prevent the mulch drawing nitrogen away from the shrub.

Bought or homemade chipped tree waste is the best mulch. Other materials such as lucerne, hay, pea straw, seaweed or compost can be used, but tend to be more expensive.

Spring is the perfect time to apply the mulch, which should be topped up twice a year in Autumn and Spring.



## Fertilisers

Each type of shrub has its own special nutrient needs, but many people try to encourage lots of growth and use too much fertiliser.

You can cut the use of fertiliser in half by simply improving and mulching your soil.

This may not produce rapid plant growth, but the plants will be healthier and less susceptible to pests and diseases.

## Irrigation

Micro-irrigation is ideal for shrubs. It is also:

- Cheap
- Easy to install
- Can be hidden under mulch
- Can deliver variable amounts of water to the right locations.

The parts can be bought as needed and the system can be easily connected to a tap or reticulated system. Micro-systems also work well with tap timers.

Shrubs in well-mulched soil can be watered every second day in the heat of Summer and much less frequently in Winter. Very tough and drought resistant shrubs can last up to a month without watering.

Remember to water in the early morning or evening, to minimise evaporation. Also, a long, deep watering will ensure a good root system and reduce the likelihood of salts intruding on your shrubs.

## Pruning

The more leaf area a plant has, the more water is lost. Pruning garden shrubs back after Spring reduces the leaf area for Summer, and thus reduces the shrub's water needs.

Care needs to be taken with pruning. Seek advice from your local nursery or gardening centre about appropriate pruning for your shrubs.

# Waterwise gardening saves water, saves work, saves money and saves our environment

## Want more information?

The “Waterwise in the Garden” initiative is designed to help gardeners by providing expert information on how to maintain a high quality garden, but at the same time conserve water. South East Water and the Nursery & Garden Industry Victoria are eager to help Victorian gardeners to be Waterwise.

For further advice, information and practical assistance on water conservation in the garden, speak to your local nursery industry professional or call:

**South East Water**  
131 851


**Nursery & Garden Industry Victoria**  
(03) 9576 0599

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