

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

How dry I am or my tomato plant wants a beer

BY SIOUX ROGERS

With the predicted dry, dry summer looming ahead, I suppose it would be quite lovely if we could just pour cold beer on all our plants to quench their thirst. Heck, I plan to down some cold ones myself. Sadly, I doubt if the garden or your wallet would survive the hangover.

“So,” you ask, “what do I do and where do I start?” Whether this is a first-time garden or an established ho-hum garden, the rules for water conservation are the same. You start with a solid foundation, i.e., the soil.

“Okay,” you ask, “what about the soil?” Healthy soil is full of earthworms. It crumbles in your hand rather than lumping up like a ball of clay. Healthy soil is rich in organic matter and retains water for longer periods of time. Water and rich organic soil have a good relationship. The water knows how long to stay, but not so long as to slump around and make the soil boggy. If you have compost, add as much as you can to the entire garden. The compost will trap moisture and thus encourage plant roots to grow deeply. Deep roots are good—the soil is much cooler the deeper down you go. If you do not have your own compost, buy soil amendments.

Along with well-amended soil, mulching is a must. Mulching can be a very creative adventure. I have personally mulched with old rugs, old sheets and old blue jeans. More traditional mulches are straw, old leaves, black plastic, wood chips, pine needles, a light coat of pea gravel, or cardboard. What you mulch with is your call, but mulching is *not* optional. Mulching slows water runoff and evaporation. And—one more cheer for mulching—it keeps weeds under control. This is important because weeds and vegetables compete for water, scanty though it might be during a drought.

Okay, your soil is good and you are



A-frame structures can be handmade as shown (yearroundveggiegardener.blogspot.com) or by using ready-made trellises purchased at a hardware store.

ready to plant. The summer is dry and water is scarce, but we all cherish our own homegrown vegetables. You still have a very good chance of getting the garden well on its way before the terror of our hot August nights. The roots of established plants will be growing deep down in the soil to a nice cool and moist place.

Another water-saving hint is to be aware of which plants need less water when they mature. Crops such as cucumbers, summer and winter squash, melons, tomatoes, eggplants and peppers are often overwatered. Overwatering is not only wasteful, but it also dilutes the flavor of the fruit. Other plants such as potatoes, garlic and onions need no water at all after they are mature. If watered while still in the ground, they rot and get mushy.

One wee word about watering in general: use drip irrigation if at all possible. The water will go directly to the plants

instead of blowing in the wind as with an overhead water system. Drip watering can save up to 50 percent of water usage.

Don't forget the general principles we have all heard about water conservation—like turning the water off while brushing your teeth or shaving, and taking shorter showers. Better yet, shower with a friend. But my personal favorite way to conserve is by using grey water. The website www.growveg.com has an informative section on grey water (“water from washing machines/dishwashers and water from washing in showers, baths and sinks”). Believe it or not, plants thrive on bubble baths.

Then you ask, “So how do I plant once I have the soil and water system in place?” Start by planting in squares, blocks or whatever you call it, just not a single row of anything. Understand which plants need the water faucet off at the

end of the growing season and which plants need to continue drinking up until harvested. For example, potatoes, garlic and onions, as mentioned above, should not be watered once matured. On the other hand, leafy greens need water until harvest.

There are many creative styles of planting to save water. Here is just one idea: take two garden trellises and place them together to form an A-frame. On both sides you can plant sun-loving plants like tomatoes, pole beans, cucumbers, etc. I find this structure works best in widths no longer than three to four feet. The reason for this width is to allow you to reach in at the bottom opening of the A-frame structure where you have planted salad greens or whatever else that likes shade. If you have eight-foot long arms, then make the structure wider. The height of the structure does not matter.

You can also use this same method with just one trellis slanted slightly backward and propped up any which way. On the sun side, plant the sun lovers; on the back side, plant the wimps that use sunscreen.

A few more water conservation ideas:

1. If possible, choose plants with fewer days to maturity, or miniature plants, especially the lovely miniature and colorful bell peppers.
2. Use shade cloth if heat is high and water is low.
3. Tall sunflowers are excellent umbrellas for green leafy vegetables, squash, eggplants, and various other yummy etceteras.

That's it, folks; however, all the above ideas and information work only in *healthy* soil with a good mulch overcoat.

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