



Spring planning for summer irrigation

Spring plantings will need watering the following summer; even well-adapted natives need help until they establish good root systems. It is less critical to water plants that were installed in the fall, but even they can benefit from irrigation. You have many options for watering your plants:

Hand watering. You may be able to hand water a small site. If so, use a watering wand, available from retail garden stores. Watering wands sprinkle the water gently so it won't damage the plants, and it soaks into the ground instead of running off. You can also bury a short section of perforated pipe vertically next to each plant with the top protruding slightly above ground. Watering into the pipe will deliver the water directly to the root zone with no runoff.

Overhead sprinklers. "Rainbird" type overhead sprinklers are the cheapest, easiest way to water large areas, but they waste a lot of water and encourage weed growth between the plantings. Unless you have plenty of water and time to pull weeds, this is usually the last option.

Micro-irrigation. Micro-irrigation, the latest thing in landscape irrigation systems, consists of tiny sprinklers placed low to the ground and aimed at the plantings. Micro-irrigation may be worth considering if you plan on installing a permanent system. However, most native plantings should not need watering after a year or two.

Drip irrigation. Drip irrigation uses little water and may be applied with porous pipe or drip tubing. Porous pipe sweats water along its entire length. It is cheap and easily installed on small, level sites, but it waters unevenly over long runs or on sloped ground. Drip tubing has ultra-low flow emitters spaced along the tubing. Drip tubing may be ordered with the emitters pre-installed at regular intervals—this type is easy to install, but it is designed to soak the ground, not deliver water directly to the plants. By installing your own emitters on small side-tubes (straightforward but laborious), you can deliver the water directly to the plants. Drip tubing needs a pressure regulator and filter in order to flow properly and avoid clogging. Be sure to buy pressure-compensating emitters for sloping sites.

Irrigation schedule. Infrequent, deep watering helps natives and discourages weeds. Once a week in the early summer is plenty (even less for shady sites). By mid-August, cut back to every other week in order to encourage early dormancy. And don't bother to water if it rains hard.

Remember the mulch! Watering without mulch is like heating your house with all the doors and windows wide open—you lose at least half the benefits. Cover drip tubing with mulch, too.

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