

The Watering Can



By Beverly O'Keefe, URI Master Gardener

Efficient Water Use in the Garden

Spring planting in freshly warmed soil is the best therapy for my winter blues, and I have been at it for several weeks now. At this time of year water is plentiful so young plants, sprouts, and seeds have no trouble gaining purchase into the nutrient rich soil (hopefully your soil testing has identified the secret "key" to unlocking these nutrients). June is also the time of year when the outdoor use of water doubles and even triples across Rhode Island, and it would serve us all well to take a few moments to think about "efficient" water use in the garden.

Efficient water use begins with a cloud burst! Rain water can be stored in containers, rain barrels, and cisterns. Rainwater is "soft," "temperate," and "free." Ground water wells in southern Rhode Island are low, and using the public water supply is expensive. Help protect your watershed by capturing rain water.

On average, Rhode Island receives between 2.5 to 3.5 inches of rain per month during the growing season with rainfall decreasing during periods of both short- and long-term drought. Rhode Island is currently in a "drought advisory" status but the National Weather Service predicts a "wetter than average" summer. Efficient water use in the garden plans for periods of decreased rainfall using "water banking." Harvest as much rain water as you can!

Efficient water use continues with a rain gauge! Don't irrigate your garden unless you absolutely know your garden has not received 1 inch of rain during the past seven days. Pick a day to begin keeping track of rainfall. For example, Sunday is a day when most of the garden chores are completed for the weekend. Purchase a rain gauge. Watch and measure rainfall during the week. If it does not rain all week – then you will have to irrigate your garden to one inch no later than Saturday. Water deeply and infrequently so the roots will grow long and deep.

Enrich **efficient water use** by calculating how much water you are putting on the lawn, the flowers, and the vegetables! Establish a "water budget" and begin thinking how much water you want to "allocate" to a certain group of plants or landscape areas. For example, "xeriscaping" principals identify the most water is to be used in the "oasis" area – that area closest to your home (patio, deck, or entertainment area). Identify your "oasis" area and limit the size to the footprint of your home.

Home gardeners can determine their water needs by using a water meter attached to the garden hose, the spray nozzle, or the automatic irrigation system. One inch of water each week for a 1,000 square foot landscaped area is approximately 620 gallons of water. If you have a 500 square foot area, approximately 310 gallons of water is needed. Use irrigation methods which maximize water delivery to the plant root system while minimizing potential evaporation.

Certain types of plants require more water than others to remain green. For example, Kentucky Blue Grass can require more than 48 inches of water during the growing season (June through August). Calculate your lawn area – how many hundreds of gallons of water are you currently allocating for your lawn? By the way – use the "footprint" test to determine your lawn's water needs. Walk on you lawn. If the blades of grass spring back up, no water is needed.

Finally, **efficient water use** contains horticultural common sense! Know your plants and establish plants with similar water needs together. Use plants native to southern New England as they will not require large amounts of water to survive throughout the season and into next year.