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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“Five Easy Steps to Water-Efficient Flower Beds”

Last year's drought and watering restrictions dashed hopes for many Georgian's annual flower beds. It's a pretty safe bet that these kinds of watering restrictions will continue to be more common considering the increasing water demands of our ever increasing population. Looking forward over the next 10 to 20 years, water management may be one of the defining issues for Georgia's economic development and environmental health. What's a gardener to do between watering restrictions, drought, and the need to conserve water? Your colorful flower bed can use the barest minimum of water and still be the envy of the neighborhood with a little planning ahead. However, you'll have to upgrade the way you've been gardening a bit. According to Paul Thomas, Extension Service horticulturist with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, there are five easy steps to water-efficient flower beds.

Step 1. There is no downside to adding organic matter to native clay soils. Amend your flower beds by tilling or spading in 4 to 6 inches of peat moss or compost and leveling the soil without compacting it too much. This will help the soil hold water during dry weather without getting mushy in wet weather.

Step 2. Choose plants that don't require a lot of water. You'll save water by using plants that are better adapted to adverse conditions. And you'll save yourself a lot of time in the garden. Plants such as Lantana, Celosia, Tithonia, Melampodium, Gomphrena, Dusty Miller, Vinca and old-timey petunias are some of the many annuals that, once established, require much less water than most. Avoid New Guinea impatiens, hybrid petunias, salvias, torenias, ageratums and marigolds since they tend to be less resilient to summer droughts.

Plant as early as you can, too, after the last chance of frost. The more cool weather annuals have to develop roots, the better they can withstand dry times. According to the UGA State Climatology Office, the last average frost date for the Jasper weather station is April 9th, which would be a safe estimate for Cherokee County. The last frost date is calculated by using long-term data to develop an average. However, the actual frost date in any year is usually within two weeks of the average frost date, so be prepared to cover the tender new plants if there is an unusually late frost.

Step 3. Install drip irrigation after transplanting your annual flowers. With water dripping slowly rather than spraying out all over the place, the water savings are significant and the plants will have fewer disease problems since their leaves will not be getting wet. It's efficient, because you put the water only where it's needed and very little is lost to evaporation, assuming you cover the drip line with mulch. Compared to automated sprinkler systems, drip irrigation is cheaper and easier to install.

Basically, you need only some drip tape, several "y" adapters to take off drip lines from the main garden hose and the patience to spread the tape out just after you transplant your bedding plants.

Most hardware stores, garden centers or irrigation supply dealers will have the hardware and will probably explain how to do this.

Step 4. Add more pine straw than you may have used in past years. If you hand-place the straw between the bedding plants so as not to cover them up, a 4- to 5-inch layer will greatly lower your water use. That much pine straw does two vital things. First, it cuts down on the heat from the sun, allowing the soil to be several degrees cooler. This, in turn, lets the plants use fewer sugars at night, saving that food for more flowers and growth. Second, it keeps the wind from pulling moisture out of the soil. Less heat and less wind will mean less evaporation. So the water you apply with drip irrigation lasts longer.

Step 5. Let the annuals dry out just a bit between watering. Don't water every day or every day you can during watering restrictions. Let the plants work for their water by growing roots deeper in the ground that you prepared with good organic matter. Each time you water, irrigate long enough to saturate the soil thoroughly. Then let the entire bed go dry before watering again. It is okay to let the plants get to the point that the new growth begins to flag or droop in the afternoon. As the plants get older and more established this slight wilting will take many more days to happen than newly planted annuals.

The bottom line is that you'll be watering less often, even as summer heat chugs on. This procedure has worked well for commercial landscapers and it has been proven to reduce water loss by as much as 30 percent. Drip irrigation lines may take another hour to set up. But the reward is having beautiful flowers in dry, hot weather without spending your evenings after work watering your flower beds or sadly watching them perish in the heat. Contact our office if you would like more information on what plants are most water efficient and other landscape water-saving tips.

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