

Water use on allotments

Water is a vital ingredient for all plot-holders growing fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers but it is a precious resource and can be a significant cost for allotment authorities. On sites with a mains water supply it should be used in a sensible and considerate manner by all. Where possible every gardener should have water butts to harvest any rain that does fall. This is vital when the plot has a greenhouse or polytunnel as this increases watering requirements significantly.

The best time to water your crops is in the evening or very early morning, using a watering can and aiming at the roots not the foliage. Water thoroughly on a weekly basis and soak the soil, this encourages the roots to go deeper in search of moisture. Water appropriately to the crop, plants also need different amounts of water at varying stages of growth and too much water can affect yield and taste.

Cucurbits Squash can survive and produce fruits from minimal watering but courgette plants need to be kept constantly moist.

Fruiting crops Aubergines, cucumbers, sweet corn and tomatoes need constant water throughout their growing period.

Leafy vegetables and salad crops Crops such as cabbages, chard and spinach along with salad crops need water at every stage of growth.

Legumes Avoid watering peas and broad beans when young but they will need water at flowering time and about 2 weeks later. Runner beans need constant moisture but French beans can cope with dryer conditions.

Onions etc Water to establish and then only in dry spells.

Potatoes Water regularly from 6-10 weeks after planting when they start to produce tubers.

Root crops Carrots and parsnips will split if watered irregularly, water before dry conditions develop.

Stem vegetables Celery, celeriac and Florence Fennel need copious amounts of water to develop and will be damaged by drought conditions.

Planting out - When planting out young plants it is always recommended that you water the hole or trench very well, before putting in your seedlings. This means the root system of your young plant will have instant access to water, also encouraging them to grow downwards to seek new water supplies.

Mulching - a 2 to 3 inch layer of mulch over the soil will help to retain moisture in the summer, suppress weeds, improve soil texture and release nutrients. Apply when the soil is wet and warm in autumn or spring and take care not to pile up against plants stems as it will cause them to rot.

Compost companies offer a vast choice of ready -made products containing bark, seaweed, bracken etc. Alternatively can use your own allotment compost or materials such as well- rotted manure, leaf mould, spent mushroom compost, bark or grass clippings.