

Tips for a Water-Wise Yard and Garden

During the rainy spring season it seems odd to “worry” about a drying garden problem, but not too long from now (two months?) it will be a typical hot, dry, Ohio summer, and we will be concerned about the lawn and garden getting too dry. Landscape watering is one of the biggest users of water, but there are a number of easy ways to save on the water bill and still maintain a beautiful yard and garden:

1. **Install a rain barrel and catch water from the downspouts.** Not only is rainwater free, it is not chlorinated and therefore a better option for plants. Rain barrels have become more popular in recent years, come in a variety of sizes with lids to prevent mosquitoes, and are easy to use. Most home improvement places carry them.
2. **Aim your downspouts toward the lawn (or a rain barrel), not the pavement.** Many homes come with the downspouts aimed onto driveways, or straight into underground pipes and out to the street or storm drains; this shoots the water quickly away from garden or lawn and it causes “shock loading” of the storm drain system and the rivers.
3. **Add compost or similar organic matter to your soil.** Adding at least one inch per year enhances the water-holding capacity and improves soil texture and composition.
4. **Plan ahead of time.** Group your plantings into high, moderate, and low water-using zones; take advantage of your yard’s natural characteristics.
5. **Apply mulch to the garden surface.** Mulches reduce water evaporation, erosion and weed growth while enhancing the look of your garden.
6. **Mow up your leaves and lawn debris and leave it on the lawn.** While it may require two mowing to make the leaves and pruning debris small enough to fall in amongst the leaves of grass, it will add “compost value” to the soil surface and thereby assist in retaining scarce rainfall during the hot summer months.
7. **Water before 10 AM.** Watering in the heat of the day means more evaporation and less water for the lawn. Afternoon or evening watering may also promote lawn diseases.
8. **Minimize the addition of fertilizers and pesticides.** Extra fertilizer increases water consumption and phosphorous-containing products that run off into the storm drains where they feed the weeds in our rivers. Check how much your lawn needs; many home improvement stores carry soils self-test kits for under \$20, less than the cost of the wasted fertilizer! When fertilizing, take care to avoid throwing any on sidewalks, curbs, or streets because all of it will go straight into the creeks and rivers with the next rainfall.
9. **Consider the best type of grass and plants for your yard.** Some grass types need more water than others. Fescues tend to require less. Ask your grass seed supplier which choices will need less water and maintenance. There are also grass types that need less mowing while still looking good.



10. **Reduce the size of your mowed grass areas.** Consider using more low-maintenance area plantings of perennials or groundcovers. Let the hedges and border planting spaces get a little wider and reduce the area to be mowed. Choose water-thrifty perennials that are native to Ohio. Use low-maintenance area plantings and groundcovers to round your corners to make for faster mowing and less trimming.
11. **Mow high.** Set your mower blade at three inches, or higher. Taller grass helps prevent weed growth (and the use of weed killers!). Additional grass height shades the surface of the soil better and thus reduces its temperature and the evaporation of water from the soil in midsummer. It may seem counterintuitive, but taller grass needs less mowing, partly because of it having fewer weeds and because taller grass makes the unevenness of the surface is less obvious. Try it!
12. **Aerate your lawn every few years.** Aerating is a simple process that extracts soil cores and strews them over the lawn surface to stimulate grass root growth, enhance oxygen levels, build surface loam, and loosen soil to increase the penetration of water and nutrients. Aerators can be rented at lawn and hardware stores.

By the way, all of these practices are better for the streams because they reduce lawn water loss, shock stream loading, and fertilizer runoff.