

Water-Wise High-Desert Landscape Workshop

Watering Native Desert Plants

Water regularly in cool months - Water less frequently but deeply in hot months

California native plants are well adapted to our climate and can tolerate extended periods of heat and drought. Many natives experience a drought-induced dormancy in the summer. They simply maintain their size and shape, add very little or no new growth, and sometimes even lose a few leaves toward the end of the season. This is how they “tough it out.” For natives to display such resilience during our long, hot, rainless season, they need to be well-established with extensive, deep root systems. Branches which shade the root zone and leaf litter or mulch will protect the topsoil from excessive drying. To have well-established plants in the summer, you must plant in the fall or spring. Summer is the most difficult season to install native plants in the landscape. Wait until fall if at all possible, and you will decrease the amount of irrigation needed to establish native plants over their first few years. You may successfully plant natives from fall until spring, but they will require less water to become well-established the earlier they are planted in the fall to spring planting window.

Here are some tips for irrigating your desert natives:

- Water to keep the plant alive, not to make it grow fast. Try to make the plant drought tolerant. Watering less often and more deeply will stimulate roots to grow deeper instead of near the surface where they will be susceptible to drying out.

- Water by hose, drip or low volume sprinkler in early morning. Avoid watering during the heat of the day or at night as this may cause branch die-back or root rot.

- Water only when the soil in the root zone (6-8” down) begins to dry out. Water enough to thoroughly soak the soil around the plant - deep enough to reach the bottom of the planting hole.

- Avoid watering frequently with small amounts of water (high frequency, short duration). This method only teaches roots to stay at the surface, susceptible to the moisture loss of hot, quick-drying surface soils. Desert soils that remain consistently wet during hot summer months are prone to the growth of soil pathogens, bacteria, and fungus, which can cause root rot in native plants and quickly kill them. Remember that our desert native plants have evolved to survive in wet soil when it is cool, and dry soil when it is hot. They are not adapted to survive wet, HOT soils.

- Apply water at a low frequency with long durations to thoroughly soak the soil and allow vital oxygen to re-enter the root zone. Remember, mulch will preserve soil moisture between waterings.

- For best results, avoid using overhead irrigation for long durations (especially in the sun) because the prolonged leaf wetting during the dry season can promote disease.

One of the biggest advantages of using California native plants is that you can select plants whose water needs match our climate. Once your plants are established you may only need to water them occasionally during dry winters and once a month or less during the dry season - late spring through fall – to keep them looking good.

