

# COMMENTARY: Try out water-wise tips for gardening in the Northwest

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Diane Emmerson (File Photo)

This time of year the soil is dry, and it is hard to keep up with your thirsty garden. If you do run your sprinkler often or hand water, you may think ruefully about the water bill, or worry about depleting your (and your neighbors') well.

It's too hot to pull or hoe weeds. Between the watering and the weeding, it's enough to send one to the deck with a tall, cold drink and let the garden fend for itself.

Now that you have your drink and are sitting on the deck reading the paper, here are a couple of options for you to ease your

gardening life.

The first is drip irrigation run on timers. Imagine your garden watering itself, and all you need to do is walk around, listening for the faint drip of small quantities of water going right where it is needed; never on the driveway or the blackberries. Occasionally you may hear a larger stream issuing from your system, and you investigate the cause. Perhaps a tiny sprinkler cap has unscrewed itself, or a connection has become loose. It doesn't take long to fix, and you can continue your leisurely stroll around

the garden, picking a few cherry tomatoes, checking on the apples and enjoying the birds splashing in the birdbath. Watering with a drip system not only deprives weeds of moisture, it also keeps the plant foliage dry, so fungal diseases like powdery mildew and blackspot are minimized. To get started, check out some YouTube videos, and stop by Ace Hardware or Island Home Center & Lumber for information and all the pieces you need. If you have a really big garden, it is possible you may have to have a setup where you move some hoses around and plug them into different zones a few times a week. If you are overwhelmed by the possibilities after looking at all the drip irrigation equipment in a store, you might hire an experienced person to help you. After one or two hours of their guidance, you should be able to do it alone.

The second way you can make your gardening life easier is to practice sheet mulching for weedy areas, shrub borders and new garden beds. Imagine walking around your well-mulched garden, with no weeds or grass poking their heads up and demanding attention. All is peace, while the mulch and cardboard do the work. You need never double dig again, and you can free up shed space by giving your rototiller to Granny's. "What is sheet mulching?" you may ask. It's basically putting cardboard on top of weeds to smother them, with a thick layer of mulch on top of the cardboard to make it look great and hold the cardboard in place. This method works beautifully in new gardens with small shrubs or new perennials — where there is space for weeds to grow. It's also a huge labor savor when you want to turn part of your lawn into a vegetable or flower garden. You just sheet mulch the area, then wait six months. Then, with a trowel, make small holes right through the mulch and decaying cardboard for your baby plants.

They grow up with minimal weed competition, and plenty of moisture in the soil. To get started with sheet mulching, you can save your own cardboard, or get extra from the cardboard Dumpsters around Vashon town. I like the ones behind Ace and Pandora. You will want to remove the packaging tape, because it won't decompose like the cardboard does (after six months to a year). Just sprinkle the cardboard with water to loosen the tape's grip. For sheet mulching over grass, be sure that not one blade of grass is visible through gaps or holes in the cardboard.

Once the grass is fully covered, then you can spread mulch over the cardboard. The first shovelfuls may move the cardboard out of place, so go slow at first. If the space is going to be a vegetable garden, use compost as mulch on top of the cardboard. If you are sheet mulching around established shrubs and perennials, 3-4 inches of wood chips will last much longer to deter weeds and hold in moisture.

Now that you know about the benefits of drip systems and sheet mulching, imagine yourself with your cold drink in your hand on a hot August day, strolling your efficiently well-watered and mulched garden, enjoying the beauty and bounty you had always imagined.

— *Diane Emerson is part of Garden Green, a local effort to reduce the use of toxic pesticides.*

