

The Zen of Watering

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I had the opportunity to meet a wonderful woman who works at home, able to spend lots of time in her garden, with a wireless headset to answer the phone. She hand waters her considerable parcel every day, and the care shows in the vibrant flowers, overachieving fruit trees, and great vegetables.

Master Gardeners have written several articles this summer on water saving strategies. Given the weather this year and the pitiable rain and snow fall, we really need to consider saving every drop possible. But, there is something about walking around the garden, looking at each plant and considering it as an individual, and giving it the life sustaining water it needs. I would hate to stop my early morning practice of hand watering.

Gardens are one of the last refuges of easily accessible contemplation in our busy lives. Gardens force us to slow down, take a close look and then move back to consider the whole. Whether we stoop to pick a few weeds, or deadhead some spent blooms, the time we spend in the gentle activities of garden maintenance helps relax our anxieties and reduce our racing blood pressure. Watering by hand becomes a meditative act in itself. Watching the brilliant drops collect on the leaves, washing off dirt and dust, and brightening a drooping soul as the plant revives....these are all acts of rejuvenation.

Watering by hand can save water as well. By drenching the thirstier members of our plant pack and ignoring the tough drought resistant natives we celebrate the diversity of personalities and meet each one's needs individually. We can get up close and personal with pots and planters or send a luxuriant spray over a broad swath of flowerbeds, knocking off aphids as we go. The one caveat to this is: water early in the morning so the leaves have a chance to dry (so fungal infections and mildews don't develop) and you don't lose water through evaporation in the hot afternoon.

If you wish to retain the joy and serenity of hand watering, but want to reduce your water use, try reducing the amount of lawn you maintain. Lawn turf requires a tremendous amount of water and transpires water vapor to the dry air. One technique used to reduce the amount of sod is to place layers of newspaper or cardboard along the perimeter of areas of the lawn that you no longer want or need. Cover the layers with mulch. By next year, the lawn will have died and you can plant through the decomposing layers of newspaper. Or simply maintain the "newspapered" area by covering with attractive mulch or gravel to catch the irrigation run-off from the lawn.

We can also enlarge the planting beds we already maintain. A flower bed or landscaped area attractively planted with drought-tolerant natives gives us another chance to exercise our creative individuality without the heavy maintenance required by lawns.

And since we're talking about the calming effect of water, what about adding a small water feature or relaxing, gentle fountain? Not only does the sound of running water have a calming effect on the spirit, but birds and animals will gravitate to the area, connecting us to the greater world outside ourselves. In fact, one of the requirements for the National Wildlife Federation's backyard program, "Certified Wildlife Habitats," is a source of water for local fauna.

And last, but not least, let's remember that many localities no longer have the luxury of enjoying the free flow of water in their yards and gardens. In Southern California, the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) that provides water to 18 million people in six southern California counties offers rebates to homeowners who replace their lawns. Possibly the greatest benefit might be to consider the needs of California and the planet as a whole.

So....set up your drip systems and soaker hoses, set the timers and flow rates, and mulch, mulch, mulch! But keep a few pots or areas for special treatment that you can use to calm your soul. When you go out in the early morning with your cup of coffee or tea, take a look around. Breathe deeply. Enjoy the beauty and tranquility of a perfect bud. Listen to the bees as they explore the blossoms. And as one of your meditational garden activities, grab your water hose and sprayer and nourish your plants and your soul by being water smart. Enjoy the quiet time in your garden.

Anne Robin is a Master Gardener who loves the quiet times in her own garden.