

## PLANT FOOD

All living things need food and water and plants are no exception. They need a mixture of the following three main types of plant food:

- **Nitrogen** promotes leaf growth.
- **Phosphates** help roots develop.
- **Potash** increases production of flowers and fruits and improves fruit flavour. It also increases winter hardiness.

They also require trace elements of calcium, boron, iron, magnesium and manganese.

By applying a range of garden fertilisers, you can ensure your plants receive sufficient food to perform to their full potential. Some specific plants need tailored cocktails of fertilisers – roses are a good example. Ask your garden centre or nursery for information.

**INORGANIC FERTILISERS:** Those manufactured from a chemical process or mined. Today these are formulated into compound fertilisers that release a balanced amount of nitrogen, phosphates and potash over a period of time. There are dedicated fertilisers that supply just one of the elements and these can be used to correct any specific deficiency.

They are applied as a dry powder or in granule form in spring, at the manufacturer's recommended rate. Some act quickly, other slow-release types release small amounts over a long period.

Some are available in both dry or liquid forms – liquids are applied from late spring to early summer.

- **Sulphate of Ammonia** – contains concentrated nitrogen.
- **Sulphate of Potash** – a good source of potassium.
- **Growmore** – a good balanced fertiliser.
- **Sulphate of Iron** – for acid-loving plants.

**ORGANIC FERTILISERS:** Derived from vegetable or animal matter, they are often slow-acting so apply them in good time.

- **Mushroom compost** – contains a range of nutrients.
- **Liquid seaweed extract** – contains nitrogen, potash and phosphate.
- **Bonemeal** – a good source of phosphate.
- **Wood ash** – contains a small amount of potassium.
- **Fish, blood & bone** – a general fertiliser, containing phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium.

## HOW TO APPLY PLANT FOOD

- Choose a plant food formulated to the specific needs of a plant and apply at the right time of year to avoid waste and damage.
- When watering in plant food, use a separate watering can or wash thoroughly after use.
- Wear gloves when using fertilisers and avoid breathing in dust or vapour. Read the instructions.
- Always store fertilisers in a cool, dry and preferably dark place away from children and animals.



## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Watering can
  - Hose
  - Sprinklers
  - Fork & spade
  - Hoe
  - Rake
  - Water-retaining gel
  - Compost
  - Grit
- Plant food:**
- **Shrubs & trees** – Bonemeal when planting in autumn/winter; Growmore in spring/summer.
  - **Bulbs** – Bonemeal after flowering
  - **Bedding plants** – fortnightly general liquid feed
- **Container plants** – general liquid feed weekly in spring/summer

For more information:  
[www.rhs.org.uk/advice](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice)  
[www.plantforlife.info](http://www.plantforlife.info)

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## THE EASY GUIDE TO

# WATERING & FEEDING



Photography: Tim Sandall/*The Garden*, Hozelock

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## WHERE DO I START?

If you want a healthy garden with an abundance of flowers, watering and feeding are essential. Without water, plants will simply wilt and die. A complete fertiliser or specific nutrients are essential – particularly for plants growing close together. But when should you water and feed? During long hot dry spells, plants definitely need water – but make sure this is given at the right time and in the right way. And plants need to be fed during periods of active growth – not when it could encourage new growth late in the season.

## HOW TO WATER PLANTS

**WATERING CANS:** Use one fitted with a fine watering can rose. This leads to less soil disturbance and possible root or plant damage.

**SPRINKLERS:** Try not to use them in hot sunny weather as this can cause leaf scorching. More importantly the water applied has more time to be absorbed in the soil when applied in the cool of the evening or in the early morning.

**TRICKLE OR SOAKING HOSES:** deliver tiny amounts of water over an extended period of time.

**ROOT WATERING:** Sink 5-8cm diameter pipes or plastic soft drink bottles with the bottoms cut off in the soil next to trees or shrubs, or in containers. Top these up with water on a regular basis.

## WATERING TIPS

- It's better to soak plants from time to time rather than watering little and often.
- Make sure water gets right down to the roots, by placing the hose or watering can spout at the base of a plant and water gently. If soil is very dry, water twice.
- Do not water plants too forcefully. Never direct a jet of water at the base of a plant as it will wash away the soil, exposing the roots. Make a hollow around the plant base and fill with water.
- Re-use 'grey water' from baths and sinks or recycle rainwater by using a water butt.



## NEW PLANTS

New plants need a good deal of care and attention to help them adjust to their new surroundings and grow away well.

- When planting new plants, prepare the soil to ensure they get enough water and food.
- Dig the soil between 25 and 50cm deep. This will let in air and water to prevent root suffocation.
- Add some water-retaining gel or try some well-rotted manure, garden compost or peat alternative, as these will act as a sponge, retaining water.

## IRRIGATING LAWN

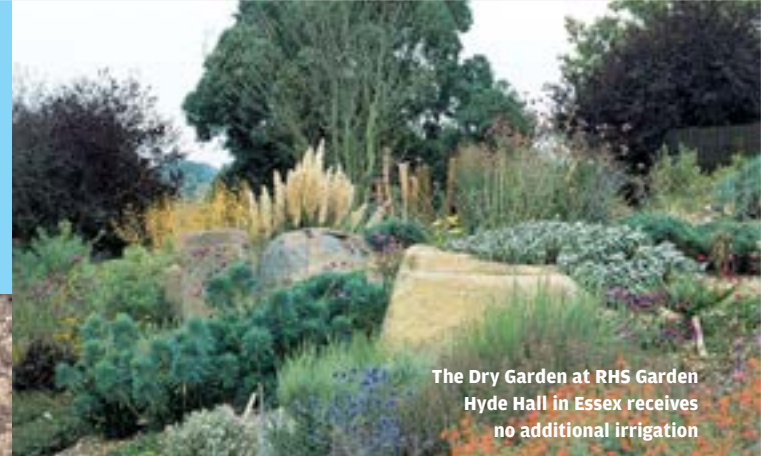
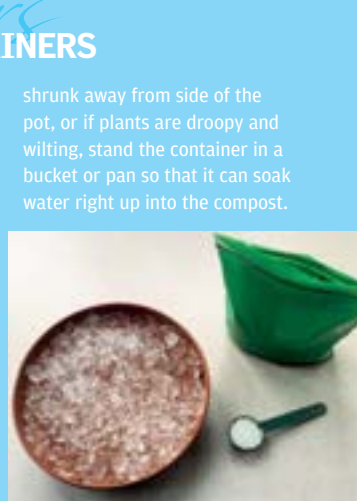
- If grass does not spring back after it has been walked on, water as soon as possible, as long as there isn't a drought!
- If it is very dry, spike your lawn with a fork before watering.
- The quickest way to water your lawn is to use a sprinkler but to ensure you don't over-water in one place, place a jar next to your sprinkler and move it once the jar has 2.5cm of water in it!

## CARING FOR CONTAINERS

Like new plants, those in pots and hanging baskets need special care as they run out of water more quickly than established border plants – which have bigger root systems and more soil from which they can reach water.

- Add water-retaining granules or gel (right) to compost in pots and place a small pipe or plastic bottle in the compost to help with root watering.
- Aim to keep the compost moist at all times, watering daily in hot weather.
- If the compost looks pale, has

- Poorly drained soils may prevent food being absorbed. Dig organic material such as compost, composted bark or, in severe cases, grit, into the soil.



The Dry Garden at RHS Garden Hyde Hall in Essex receives no additional irrigation

## DEALING WITH DROUGHT CONDITIONS

- Attach a water butt with a tap to your drainpipe to collect rainwater. Your garden centre or nursery can help.
- Keep borders well weeded as weeds compete for moisture.
- A 5-7cm protective layer of mulch such as compost, cocoa shells, bark or even gravel spread on the soil between plants reduces evaporation.
- Stop sprinkling lawns in drought – in autumn they *will* recover!
- Hoe weeds at the roots to save time and avoid disturbing the soil and increasing water loss from the surface.

● Leave grass clippings on the surface of the lawn after mowing to recycle nutrients.

**DROUGHT-TOLERANT PLANTS:** Plants with small, leathery, grassy, succulent, hairy or silver leaves tend to thrive in dry conditions.

- *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* (spurge) A hardy shrub for full sun with lime green flowers and grey green foliage.
- *Eryngium* (sea holly) A clump-forming perennial with branched stems and silver to purple-blue thistle-like flowers in summer.
- *Potentilla fruticosa* (shrubby cinquefoil) This hardy, compact shrub with white, yellow and pink flowers blooms all year.



- *Genista* has masses of pea-like flowers that smother the bush. These shrubs prefer a sunny spot and not too rich a soil.
- *Robinia* Thriving in a sheltered, sunny location, this deciduous tree has pink and white flowers.
- *Kniphofia* (red hot poker) has attractive spiky foliage and dazzling summer flowers.
- *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' (Russian sage) has plumes of long-lasting flowers and soft grey foliage.
- *Echinops ritro* (globe thistle) blue flowers, great for pollinating insects and for cut flowers.
- *Verbena bonariensis* has tall stems with clusters of small rosy-purple flowers in late summer and autumn.