

Cruising your container plants through summer

By ANNE HARVEY

It's vacation time! You may have 'real' travel planned or you may be vacationing right here in paradise; going away only in the sense of shifting and relaxing your routines to rest and enjoy your surroundings more. Either way, summer maintenance is fairly easy for container gardens.

There is no hoeing or soil cultivation needed, precious little weeding, only occasional detrimental bugs to manage, fewer diseases to worry about and minimal clean-up chores to fuss over. There are only two tasks requiring summer vigilance; watering and fertilizing, but these are critical.

I've lost more plants due to our occasional solar heat beating on containers, especially black-plastic nursery containers, and cooking the roots than from any other cause. Adopting successful low-maintenance techniques is easy with a little thought.

Both our famous 'June Gloom' and intermittent summer sunshine have come already. Typically, 'real summer' weather in our area doesn't show up until July. By now the plants, including any seedlings you picked up in May, are probably prospering and entering their peak blooming period.

Pay particular attention to watering container plants because the volume of soil is small, and they can dry out very quickly, especially on a concrete patio in full sunlight. Container plant roots cannot seek water on their own. Daily or twice-daily watering may be necessary during hot spells, especially for clay or other porous pots, or small pots. Don't be fooled by rainfall. Relatively little rain actually falls in the pots and that can evaporate before it soaks into the root zone.

Check container soil at least once a day and twice on hot, dry, or windy days, to see if it is damp. If the soil gets excessively dry or if the plants droop or actually wilt on warm days, group the containers together to make a foliage canopy to help shade the soil and keep it cool. Mulching and windbreaks can help reduce container water needs.

Avoid wilting. Some plants can't tolerate any wilting and will die the first time they are dried out. Others are more tolerant, but every plant has its limits for neglect.

Water in the morning or evening, it is easier on the plants and on you. I prefer watering early in the morning when I am rested and can better check that my pots are in good shape to take even the hottest days in stride.

If you water later in the heat of the day under a scorching sun, the leaves can burn and you may wilt if you are a true Nor'westerner. Watering in the cool of evening is an alternative, although watering then increases the local humidity through the night and can heighten the opportunity for mildew and other ailments. There are different schools of thought on this. Also, if the plant is too dry in the evening after

a hot day, it needs water right away. The most important consideration is to establish a regular time of day to water when it is pleasurable and convenient for you. Regular watering is more important than trying to uphold some ideal.

Make sure the water reaches the roots adequately. Surface watering does little good. To water a seriously dried out root ball, take small breaks between successive cycles of filling the pot with small amounts of water. If the pot is small, soak the whole pot almost up to the top of its soil level in a bucket or tub of water.

Don't drown them

Don't forget what you're doing and leave the pot submerged for hours. Fifteen to 30 minutes will do. Otherwise, you'll drown roots already stressed by drought. When air bubbles stop rising to the top, the soil has at least somewhat recovered the needed moisture.

Watering plants from above with a hose or watering can fitted with a sprinkling rose is the simplest and most common method of watering. Imagine you are a cloud refreshing your plants with an abundant but gentle spring rain with

fine droplets. This lets water soak in gradually and avoids compacting the soil.

Some plants, like some people, don't like overhead showers; hairy-leaved plants are an example. Tub soaking or carefully holding the head of the sprinkler underneath the foliage and watering just the soil works well.

Passive watering

Passive watering exploits capillary action by setting pots on wet matting or using wicks attached to reservoirs to water plants that prefer a steady supply of moisture. Many types of these inexpensive systems are available through garden supply catalogs.

Container plants mustn't stand in water. Avoid containers with attached saucers. On a wooden deck, raise container plants off the wood to allow air circulation underneath. Glazed clay pot 'feet' are available. Some are quite whimsical in form, such as frogs. When expediency, budget or function overrides form, consider ordinary bricks. Lift pots frequently to let the deck wood dry thoroughly. (Simply shifting them to one side works fine.) Many decks have been seriously damaged by hidden

standing water.

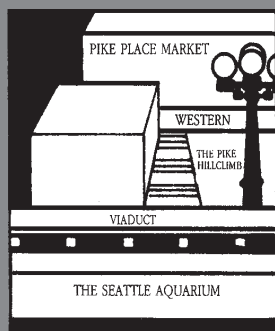
Fertilize plants with the recommended rate of a water-soluble fertilizer every two to three weeks. An occasional application of fish emulsion or compost will add trace elements to the soil.

Do not add more than the recommended rate of any fertilizer or you may burn and kill your plants. Unlike garden plants, container plants do not have large soil and humus buffers to protect them from over-fertilizing or over-liming.

Liquid fertilizer is easy to use for baskets, window boxes, and smaller containers. Fertilize plants with the recommended rate of a water-soluble fertilizer every two to three weeks. An occasional application of fish emulsion or compost will add trace elements to the soil. Liquid fertilizer is easy to use for baskets, window boxes, and smaller containers.

Don't forget to keep container plantings thriving and blooming by removing old, spent flowers. Seed pods that form on annual flowers will stop the plant from blooming. Check under leaves and deep in plants for hidden seed capsules.

Enjoy summer!



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