

Farm Stewardship Tips Help Gardeners – Part 2



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Since moving to the country, it has become obvious to me that Ontario's farmers employ many practices that gardeners can learn from. The wise use of our water resources is one example.

Water is one of the most important resources required to grow crops or raise livestock. Both the quality and the amount of water are very important. Too little water can lead to crop failure or threaten livestock health; too much water can delay crop planting or harvest, cause disease problems for crops and livestock and create soil erosion problems.

Protecting water resources is a central theme throughout the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program, which allows farmers to evaluate the environmental benefits and risks of their farm operations, and create action plans to enhance the benefits and reduce the risks. The EFP is a voluntary educational program supported through the Agricultural Policy Framework (APF), a federal, provincial and territorial initiative that aims to make Canada's agricultural sector a world leader in environmentally sustainable production. *More than two-thirds of*

Ontario's farmers have participated in the EFP program [including me!]

Among other things, farmers learn that water quality is protected by sealing and capping old wells, planting tree and vegetation buffers along streams to control runoff and fencing along streams to keep livestock [and their manure] out.

Farmers growing high value crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, strawberries, or many other fruits and vegetables, usually invest in irrigation systems to allow them to water crops at key points in the crop's development, or during dry periods. Irrigation systems have come a long way. Today's systems are extremely efficient, accounting for every single gallon of water.

We can learn other lessons from Ontario's farmers as well. Observing the time of day that many nursery growers apply water to their crops teaches us that we should water our gardens early in the morning to reduce evaporation and allow water to soak into the soil. If this is not possible, water in the early evening. Early morning or evening watering will reduce the amount of water needed to do the job effectively.

I am a great fan of mulching the garden. Mulches prevent evaporation and retain moisture in the soil at the root zone. Mulches keep the soil cool in summer months and help insulate plant roots from the freeze/thaw cycle during winter. Perhaps the most compelling reason for mulching is its ability to reduce weeds, which in turn reduces the amount of weeding that you will have to do by about 90%. Mulching also helps capture heavy rainfall instead of allowing it to run off causing erosion.

Gardeners, like farmers, have the option of choosing plants which can withstand dry conditions or choosing from many different methods of water conservation. A combination of these practices will result in low maintenance gardens and lower water bills. The first step in creating a 'water-efficient

garden' is to group plants according to their water requirements. Do not mix plants with high and low water requirements in the same area. Grouping plants together with similar needs for water will take full advantage of the water that you apply to your garden.

Choose plants wisely, using drought-tolerant plants in the dry, hot, south- and west-facing gardens, and moisture-loving plants along north- and east-facing slopes and walls.

If your garden is in a windy location, plant a screen to protect plants from drying winds. Here in Ontario the most widely planted hedge for this purpose is the native White Cedar [*Thuja*].

Do not over-water. Water infrequently, but thoroughly, in order to encourage deep root growth.

Avoid wasting water by evaporation. Drip irrigation systems are more efficient than sprinklers and deliver water directly to the soil surface. I recommend installing rain barrels to collect free, natural rain water from your roof. Research has proven that 'hand watering' using a watering can uses only 17% of the water normally used when watering with a garden hose.

Keep a cover on your rain barrel when not in use in order to keep out insects and prevent evaporation. Leave a watering can at each location for quick and easy use. I have 4 rain barrels around my property and find them to be a great time saver when it comes to watering container grown plants and newly planted specimens in the garden.

Rain barrels also provide soft, warm water: there is not a plant out there that doesn't appreciate that and I swear – their performance in the garden is proof of this!

The use of rain barrels goes back a least of couple of hundred years here in Ontario...hardly a new idea. But definitely a great one!