

Keep your garden looking good

Adrienne Wyper describes some easy ways to ensure your garden plot looks its best for as long as possible – whatever the weather and whether you're there or not

Most gardens are at their best in summer, bursting with colour and scent. High temperatures and holidays can hit your plot hard, but you can keep it looking great as days shorten and temperatures drop.

Plan for autumn interest

Plan – and plant – ahead to sustain a stunning display, adding plants with autumnally attractive flowers, foliage, stems, berries or seeds.

Dahlias are this season's stars, with flamboyant or subtle blooms until the first frosts. Plant out the tubers after the risk of frost has passed. In late autumn, after the first frost, dig them up and store in a dry, frost-free place, such as a shed, then replant next year. Chrysanthemums are an autumn classic, available as young plants in early summer or later as mature blooms. Colours range from muted pastels to fiery brights. After they flower, cut down to 20cm/8in.

Bulbs aren't solely for spring. Late spring to summer is the time to plant autumn-flowering bulbs. Tuck autumn crocus (*crocus sativa*) clusters into the lawn, and similar-looking colchicums beneath trees. Or add drama with the pink, backward-curling petals of *nerine bowdenii*.

The purpose of all plants is to reproduce, by forming flowers, then seed. Deadheading

– pinching or snipping off faded flowers – encourages plants to devote their energy to creating more flowers. If self-seeding is an issue, with plants spreading invasively, deadheading takes care of that too.

But don't deadhead plants with attractive seedheads, such as ornamental grasses, sedums and clematis. And leave those like sunflowers, which are eaten by birds.

Keeping soil cooler by adding a thick mulch – grass cuttings, leaves, wood chips, homemade compost or shredded newspaper – protects plants from heat and extends flowering, as well as retaining water and adding nutrients. And weed regularly as unwanted plants steal water, light and nutrients from your specimens.

How and when to water

In hot weather, water regularly, up to twice a day for containers and hanging baskets. Soak, don't sprinkle, the soil, for deeper root growth. Watering in the evening or early morning, when soil is cooler, minimises evaporation.

Boost growth by adding compost or manure and liquid feed to soil. Early in the season, use nitrogen-rich feed, for stem, leaf and branch growth. Later, for flowering, potassium and phosphorus are key.



Help for holidays

If you don't have a willing neighbour, try the moisture-maximising ideas below, which will also stand you in good stead for future heatwaves.

Before planting, mix water-retaining granules into containers' compost, especially hanging baskets. When watered, these swell and release their water gradually.

Before you go away, give everything a good soaking. Put saucers under containers, and group the containers to form a damper microclimate and/or move them into slight shade.

You can buy reservoir waterers, some decorative. Fill with water, push into the soil and water trickles down through the spout. Or make your own





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with a plastic drinks bottle: poke holes in the lid, fill with water and push in the soil upside down. Or for a higher-tech solution, buy a mains or solar-powered automatic irrigation system.

Postpone flowering until your return by removing buds on summer bedding such as pansies and antirrhinums, as well as dahlias. Cut a bunch of flowers to give away, which encourages further flowering.

Help in a heatwave

Last summer was the driest in nearly 30 years, with the temperature hitting 40°C for the first time. Experts have warned another hot, dry spell could mean drought this year, despite winter rainfall. During the heatwave,



many of us witnessed signs of heat stress in our gardens, with drooping, wilted stems and fading flowers. If another strikes this year, plunge pots into a container of water for an hour or so, then drain. But resist the urge to 'tidy up' brown, crispy bits; you don't want to stimulate new growth if another hot spell is coming.

And don't water the lawn. Longer grass is better for wildlife, and soon recovers if it does get a bit parched.

Ways of watering

If this summer is hot and dry, hosepipe bans seem inevitable. By the end of last August, these affected more than 20 million people in England and Wales – Yorkshire Water's ban wasn't lifted until 6 December.

Two-thirds of the UK's water is used by homes, and half of that on gardens. Using a hose for an hour uses roughly the same amount of water a family of four uses in two days – something to think about if you have a water meter.

Watering cans are the obvious alternative, though carrying them is hard work. If rain is forecast, stand watering cans, buckets and plastic tubs outside to fill near where they're needed. Rainwater's lower pH suits most plants better than mains water. It's also usually warmer and using it saves money if you have a meter.

Collect 'grey water' used for washing dishes or yourself. In the shower, use a container or put the plug in, or scoop up cooled bathwater in watering cans and buckets.

If you have an outside tap and hose, you can siphon out the water, as long as your bath is higher than your garden. Here's how: put the free end

of the hose into the bath, turn on the outside tap until water flows into the bath (showing the hose is filled), then disconnect the tap end of the hose and the bathwater will flow out of the bath. But don't use grey water on edible plants.

Consider installing a water butt to collect water from gutters – up to 5,000 litres a year. You can also fit them to garages and sheds as long as they have a gutter and a downpipe.

Wildlife may also struggle in extreme temperatures, so feed the birds and provide a saucer of water – which may also be visited by hedgehogs and other small mammals.

Change for a changing climate

The Royal Horticultural Society says: "All gardeners, especially those in the south of Britain, need to consider how climate change will affect the plants they grow."

As a rule of thumb, drought-resistant plants' leaves are: silvery or greyish-green to reflect the sun's rays; hairy to trap moisture; succulent to store water; or leathery to reduce water loss. Look for 'drought tolerant' on the label.

But don't imagine 'dry' or 'drought-tolerant' means bleak; it can be lush. For inspiration, visit Beth Chatto's dry garden near Colchester in Essex, unwatered since 1992, or the water-wise garden at Cambridge University Botanic Garden. And check out the Hamptons Mediterranean Garden at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Its drought-tolerant planting includes scented shrubs, aromatic herbs and ornamental perennials.

Watering less means reduced demand on the mains supply, lower water bills – and less work for you. ☺