

The Basics

W^{atering}

Regulated watering is one of the most important requirements of indoor culture. One of the first questions a beginner will ask is "How often do I water?" This is a question that can only be answered by you. It will depend on many conditions: your level of humidity, air conditioning, heating, retentiveness of soil, over or under potting, clay versus plastic pots. All of these things will have some bearing on the frequency of your watering.

There are no hard and fast rules to apply, except that you should never let your plants suffer from under or over watering. The rule of thumb can be followed (no pun intended) by actually pushing your thumb into the top inch of the soil. If it appears dry, then it should be watered.

Better still, one should set up a watering program that will conform to one's conditions, and follow the pattern until it becomes a routine. For instance, should your plants require watering twice a week, you might choose Mondays and Thursdays. Set up a schedule to perform the task at the same time each day, and follow it through the week. Experimenting and carefully observing your plants' needs will give you the answer. There are also exceptions to every rule; you will detect that some of your plants may need more or less watering. For a beginner the best solution is to keep these plants together where they can receive special attention.

Water should be tepid and may or may not include fertilizer. Each plant could have its own saucer, and for bottom watering the saucers should be oversized.

Your watering can should be of manageable size and not one that you cannot control. It should have a long spout that can reach your plants without any difficulty. Plants can easily be ruined by the watering can. Food basters and battery fillers are also very useful for watering and are easily maneuverable.

My watering system consists of a 77 L (17-gallon) plastic pail filled with water (and fertilizer). It is equipped with a small fountain pump with a long hose attached, at the end of which is a water nozzle with a long thin spout. With this method I can easily water a large number of plants and

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freely move from one room to the other.

The following are the most acceptable ways of watering:

Top watering is probably the most widely used method, but not the most practical. There is a chance of spilling water and fertilizer on the leaves which in turn will cause water marks and burning.

A good point about top watering is that it leaches the soil and deters a buildup of fertilizer salts. Water should be poured through, avoiding the center of the plant, and as near the rim of the pot as possible. It is advisable to use a small watering can with a long spout or a basting or batter bulb for this purpose. These will lessen the chance of damaging the leaves as a cumbersome watering can would. It is imperative that plants should not be left standing in water more than one half hour. Most plants and especially Saintpaulias are very susceptible to rot from wet feet.

Bottom watering is my preferred method of watering. With each pot placed in an oversized saucer, I fill the saucer with the solution and let it stand for no longer than one half hour. In this time the soil will have absorbed its capacity. If any water remains in the saucer it is discarded. Less damage is likely to be done to the leaves as the saucers are easily accessible. The one disadvantage is that the fertilizer salts are transmitted to the top of the pot. This can easily be remedied by giving your plants an occasional leach with clear water.

Wick watering is done by placing a three- to four-inch long synthetic wick through one of the bottom holes of your pot. Use another container, such as a margarine tub, and cut a slit in its cover. Fill this container with water and place the plant on top while suspending the wick in the water. You can do this on a larger scale by filling a tray with water and covering it with what is known as egg crating, cut to size, which is available at hardware stores. Wicking should be synthetic, or else it will rot. Strips of nylon stocking, synthetic string, or strips of capillary matting may be used for this purpose.

Capillary matting is not always easily available. It is normally purchased in a roll and can be cut to your desired specifications. Synthetic blankets may also be substituted for this purpose and are normally much less expensive. Cut to the required size and placed in the bottom of a tray, it is kept saturated and the plants that are placed on it will absorb the desired amount of water. It is recommended that the pots be equipped with a short wick to make the contact with the matting. To lessen the watering periods, a reservoir may be installed. This can also be done by placing egg crating,

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covered with matting, in the tray, and filling the tray with water. A small portion of the matting must be suspended in the water.

Mildew and algae, which may be unsightly and malodorous, are potential problems with capillary matting. Frequent laundering in bleach is necessary to keep this problem in check. There are formulas on the market to discourage the problem, but I have never found them very effective.

Here are some pointers that may help with your watering program:

- Never let your plants dry out completely
- Never let your plants stand in water more than a half hour
- More damage is caused by over watering than by under watering
- Ensure that the soil is entirely moistened but not saturated
- Avoid getting water on the foliage of your plants
- If water is chlorinated, it is beneficial to let it stand overnight

