

Cover Story

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Triple Threat

Jennifer Polanz

Way back in the May issue of *Green Profit*, my colleague, Ellen Wells, addressed overwatering in houseplants. Now, we're going to take a look at outdoor plants and the challenges surrounding water there for both garden center employees and consumers.

We're going to break it down based on three areas of watering: in the garden center, which can help the bottom line; when a customer gets a plant home and puts it in the ground; and when a customer looks to the convenience of a container. They all have different stress points and challenges associated with them.



At the Retail Level

I went back to one of Ellen's sources, Louis Damm, who heads up the Canadian sales team for Dramm Corporation, because not only is he often an expert speaker on the topic of watering, but his family also owns a wholesale operation and retail garden center (centre there). He understands the importance of quality watering!

At their retail location, all new employees are required to watch a Dramm video called "Watering 101" to start off properly—you can scan the QR code in the sidebar to see that video and another Damm created on selecting the right tools for watering, including the difference between nozzles and water flows.

"We routinely review the watering techniques of each employee," he added. "This is how they will understand that the act of overwatering does not reduce the chore of watering. Overwatering leaches out all the soil's valuable nutrients.

"Training your staff will result in staff giving good watering advice to customers."

The biggest challenges he sees on a consumer level is actually quantifying the amount of water needed based on a water volume measurement, the best time of day to water and the soil area to place the water.

"The number one question asked is, 'How much water does this plant need?'" he said. "The second question is, 'How often should I water?' This is a universal question on watering over the whole range of plants a customer may

purchase from the garden center.”

Watering In New Plants

I reached out to Jennifer Brennan, who retired earlier this year after 35 years at a Chicagoland garden center and the Chicago Botanic Garden and started Jennifer Brennan Horticultural Consulting (along with a few other side quests!). She’s been counseling customers on watering for decades and has come up with an easy technique to help them better understand how to water plants in. But first, a mindset shift.

“These newly planted plants need to be treated like intensive-care patients,” she said, emphasizing that watering in the first six to eight weeks of a plant’s life in the ground is crucial to the plant putting out roots. “I have people emailing me back saying, ‘Oh my goodness, this makes such a difference.’”

Her method, simply put, is in the first two weeks to water every other day no matter what the daily temperature is using a four quadrant, count-to-five method:

- Mentally divide the root ball into four quadrants
- Hold the sprayer set to shower directly over quadrant one and count to five
- Move the sprayer to quadrant two, count to five, repeat with quadrants three and four
- Repeat twice around all the quadrants to water the root ball from top to bottom
- After two weeks, change watering to three times per week until the eight-week period is finished. If temps rise over 90F during the two- to eight-week period, go back to watering every other day.

After the eight-week period, this is where it gets a little tricky—customers should watch the rain gauge to know when to water again. Jennifer noted that when temps are 75F degrees or lower, 1 in. of rain is adequate for lawns, trees, shrubs, roses, perennials annuals and vegetables. For each additional 10 degrees above 75F, those plants need an additional half inch of rain or supplemental water a week. This one is kinda funny, too: Jennifer said if it’s raining on a day you’re supposed to water, complete the watering unless it’s raining hard enough to soak your clothes “and get your underwear wet.” That’s a great descriptor for just how hard it should be raining!

Sprinklers are another topic and sometimes they aren’t being run long enough or placed in the right location to water in plants. Jennifer recommended calibrating the irrigation system by placing some kind of water gauge near the root ball of a plant to make sure it’s getting at least a half inch of water. If it’s not, it needs to run longer.

Container Watering

Consumers love containers because they’re often easier than maintaining full landscapes. However, watering is still a key to success here, and often containers need even more attention.

“Patio containers can dry out rapidly, particularly in hot, sunny or windy conditions, which leads to root stress and early death,” said Heather Poire, retail solutions manager for Proven Winners, who added other challenges include going away on vacation and forgetting to water and fertilize, or watering improperly. Self-watering containers are a great option take away all the guesswork involved.

That’s what led to the development of AquaPots Lite, a watering system that helps consumers keep their pots appropriately watered for longer periods of time, keeping plants healthier and improving their success.

“Let’s face it, there are customers who just want a DIFM solution: this is where positioning self-watering containers as a convenient solution comes into play,” Heather said. “For consumers who want beautiful plants, but struggle

with watering consistency, retailers can introduce self-watering systems as a way to make container gardening easier, more forgiving and less time consuming.” Consumers remember the retailers who helped them achieve success, too, she said, and share that information with their friends.

Proven Winners now focuses on AquaPot Lite Inserts, which turn any container into a self-watering system by providing a reservoir for water at the base of a pot, allowing the customer to water about once every two weeks, depending on conditions (they first need to soak the container from the top so the roots don’t dry out until they start wicking water up from the reservoir). Customers also can put water-soluble fertilizer through the watering tube in the insert, making it an easy way to feed plants. The components can be cleaned and reused so customers can keep using them year after year. The AquaPot Lite Inserts come in three convenient sizes and include a square adapter that can be purchased for large square containers.



Positioning Watering Tools

It’s hard to talk to every customer, so it’s important to show them how vital these tools are with signage, displays and digital communications.

“The successful retailers know that the first sale to a new customer is the most important sale,” Louis said. “With this, I mean teach your customers on how to take care of their purchases from your business. Plants need water, fertilizer and soil to live a healthy life.”

He added to remind the customer the first thing they’ll do to the plants they just purchased is to give them water. How will they do that?

“Make access to watering tools and aids easy to buy,” he said. “A forgotten purchase will be purchased someplace else.”

Heather noted plants will always have watering needs and environmental conditions matter, so retailers can position their products as ways to make it all easier and more consistent for better success.

“Position it as an upgrade: make it part of the design experience,” she said, adding creative retailers can put together a complete self-watering solution kit of Proven Winners plants, potting soil, fertilizer and the AquaPots Lite Insert. “These retailers are selling a beautiful, ready-to-enjoy experience rather than just another pot.”

One final note from Louis: “I would like to remind plant growers and plant retailers that ‘we are in the business of converting water to dollars’! The more disciplined we are on proper watering, the more valuable we become to our customers.” **GP**

More Resources

My sources were generous with their resources! Below are videos on watering from Louis Damm of Dramm and visit [Dramm.com](https://www.dramm.com).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAT6PNUgyRc>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6av_JDaOKQA&t

For more on the AquaPot Inserts, including benefits for home gardeners and point-of-purchase material, view videos below respectively, and visit [aquapots.com](https://www.aquapots.com) for more details.

https://www.provenwinners.com/AquaPots_Benefits_consumers

<https://www.provenwinners.com/category/store/point-purchase-materials/aquapots-signage>

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