

Features

1/1/2021

Back to Basics: Watering 101

Jennifer Polanz



Water. It's the most essential input for life, both in humans and plants. And yet, it's often the most nebulous and confusing topic for new and experienced gardeners alike. How often should I water? What time of day? For how long?

If you think you've heard those before, get ready to hear them all again—probably over and over again—this spring. With somewhere between 15 and 20 million new gardeners, that refrain is going to get real old real fast.

So how do we help gardeners figure this out, and in the process create a profitable watering and irrigation department in the garden center where customers can find the right products? There are a couple of ways. Let's explore them here.

Meeting Immediate Needs

When creating an area, whether it's a full department or just a larger display of watering implements, one of the elements that has to be visible is some knowledge about watering, says Dramm Sales Manager Louis Damm, who also owns Floral Dimensions, a family-owned greenhouse and flower farm outside of Fenwick, Ontario, Canada.

"The first thing to making an irrigation department or watering tools display, whether automatic or manual, is we have to elevate the importance of watering and transfer that knowledge," he says.

Retailers can do this in a couple of ways. Videos that play on-site can be helpful, or in place of that offering visuals of how much water different-sized plants need.

"Each plant has its own requirements, each container size its own needs," he notes. "It's a matter of calibrating it. Put water in a measuring cup to show what the amount needed is to reach a satisfaction point for each plant." That could even be a graphic image of a measuring cup filled to the right amount posted by that plant.

He stresses it's important for customers to be able to understand how to water manually before they begin to use automatic methods. He recommends putting manual watering tools—like water wands, spray nozzles, hoses and

watering cans—toward the front of the store, and place automatic irrigation tools and drip irrigation toward the back.

“That’s going to take more time to explain—that’s going to take more hand-holding,” he reasons. That front display or section should have an array of tools, from longer watering wands to shorter with automatic shutoff. It should also look good. That may sound obvious, but these products can sometimes hang around for a bit and they often blend in to the surroundings with no one noticing the layer of dust or fading that can occur.

“A clean display will always sell,” Louis adds. “The housekeeping around the display is really important.”

Long-Term Success

We’ve covered the short-term needs that customers need in the heat of spring. Louis recommends not promoting automatic and drip-irrigation systems until after the spring rush so you have more time to explain it to customers. During the early summer, these systems can be highlighted through a series of videos or online live workshops (or, hopefully, in-person events by that time) that walk consumers through how to set up timed irrigation and drip systems.

John Farner, industry development director of the Irrigation Association, says we’re in what he calls a “renaissance of irrigation technology” right now and that’s definitely to the benefit of retailers. There’s all kinds of new tech out there, both on the management side of how to control watering, as well as on the application side in the drip lines and emitters.

For example, there are now smart irrigation systems that rely on current and historic weather data to control when watering happens, and customers can control it from their smartphone from anywhere in the world. On the application side, there are now water-pressure regulating systems that regulate water flow and pressure at the sprinkler head level. That’s more on the landscape installation side, but still cool stuff.

“We need to understand what the consumer wants out of their irrigation system,” John says. “They want to keep their investment in plant material and their yards alive. They want to reap the benefits of having a healthy, living landscape.”

Consumers also are interested in conserving water, both for the environment and for their water bills. That’s why these new automated systems are becoming more popular. John recommends retailers partner with water providers or irrigations specialists to help customers who want to install some of these more complex systems. These specialists can be found in a clearinghouse on Irrigation.org, the website for the Irrigation Association.

Final Thoughts

There are additional products that fit the bill here and could make for a more robust watering section. Rain barrels and rain chains can be grouped into the manual watering display, for example, along with timers, shut-off valves and a variety of sprinklers.

On a side note, I noticed as I was looking back through retail garden center visit images for this story that there are an awful lot of watering cans displayed way up high. They may look great, but shorties like me can’t reach those, and I may just be too embarrassed to ask someone to help me get one down.

Here’s a final thought from Louis: “The subject of watering at the retail garden center level is really, really important. They come to the garden center for guidance, and if they get it, they’ll just end up buying more plants. You don’t have to grow your business by getting more customers; they’ll just buy more. Everybody wants to be successful.” **GP**

Retailers can help staff and customers figure out the tricks of the trade with the help of Louis Damm's video tutorial on watering. This was made for greenhouse staff, but retailers can take the knowledge from it and easily create their own watering tutorials designed for in-house and customer education. Open your phone's camera and train it on the QR code to watch the video (if that doesn't work, you'll have to download a QR code-reading app). <https://rainwand.com/watering-101>.