

Gardening in a drought

With Climate change leading to more frequent drier and hotter summers, improving the drought resilience of your garden is likely to be well worth the time and money.

Essex is the driest county in Britain and certain parts of Essex are officially classified as semi-arid and in Danbury is certainly feels like that this year. [Records show](#) that we have always had periods of dry weather. However the extreme temperatures this year have also compounded the impact on the [soil moisture deficit](#), a measure of the how dry the soil is, which is near to record levels.

Although we have had little or no rainfall in the last couple of months the drought we are experiencing this year is still less severe than 1976 as the hot, dry summer of that year came of the back of the particularly dry winter of 1975/76. The winter just gone was not unusually dry and 2021 was above averagely wet as a whole. The current drought conditions are likely to continue into next year if this coming winter does not have high rainfall. So it is important to start preparing your garden for next year during this coming autumn and winter.

Tips for conserving moisture and minimising water consumption:

1. Mulch your borders to reduce evaporation from the soil: this is best done in early spring (after soil moisture levels have recovered). Mulch is any material that can provide a cover over bare soil to aid water retention. Ideally a 6cm layer should be applied. A cost effective method is use your own home made garden compost (a mixture of grass clippings and leaves makes a very good compost) however a good alternative is [shredded woody material](#). A garden shredder is very cost effective tool for re-using this material. Alternatively you can buy landscaping bark or other mulch products from a garden centre. The mulch, will slowly decompose and gradually be drawn into the soil by worms and will disappear over a couple of years. However this process is great for improving the condition of your soil as well as for water retention so your plants get a double benefit. Depending on what mulch material you use this process can take a year (with garden compost) or longer with woody material.
2. Plant trees to provide some shade – many of our favourite plants are not suited to hot beating sun and low humidity and therefore will get scorched in hot weather if fully exposed to the midday sun. Planting trees with shrubs as an understory will help the more delicate plants survive hot weather. Deciduous trees offer shade in summer when they are in leaf but allow sunlight pass through in winter when the leaves are down. Trees are best planted in autumn and need to be looked after for the first few years until their roots are established.
3. Use plants that are drought tolerant – Beth Chattos' [gravel garden](#) in Elmstead Market is famous for never having been watered, equally RHS Hyde Hall has a [dry garden](#) that showcases what can be achieved with drought tolerant planting. The RHS has a [plant search website](#) that can help you identify the best plants for your location. Again new plants are best planted in autumn.
4. If you do water then the evenings are the best time, this avoids moisture loss to evaporation.
5. Water after light or moderate rainfall. It may seem counter intuitive but if there has been light rainfall (say less than 10mm in summer) this will quickly evaporate as it has not penetrated very deep. Watering directly after the rain will allow the additional water to penetrate deeper and stay in the soil longer.
6. Use a drip hose or soaker hose to target your watering to the plants that most need it. Avoid using a lawn sprinkler as this will lead to a lot of evaporation before the water reaches the plants.
7. Buy a rain gauge so you can see how much water your garden receives from natural rainfall: In high summer the moisture loss from the soil is often equivalent to 100mm of rain per month which is far more than we usually get so some watering may be required – however it also important not to overwater as the roots need to be encouraged to grow deeper to find moisture. Your own rain gauge or monitoring [local weather statistics](#) will help you get the balance right.