TIME LIFE
House Plant Pavilion

How to Water Flowering Plants

How to water is nearly as important as when. The first rule is: do not use cold water, which will set back many plants severely--especially in winter. African violets are so sensitive to cold water, that if water below room temperature is spilled on their leaves, they will develop ugly yellow blotches. This characteristic has given rise to the widespread belief that African violets cannot stand water on their foliage. Not so. It is just water of the wrong temperature: in commercial greenhouses, African violets get water as warm as the greenhouses themselves. Use water at a temperature of about 90 degrees Fahrenheit. You don't need a thermometer to test it. Just put your finger in it. If it feels tepid, it will do.

Of less importance than the water's temperature, but of concern to some gardeners, is the chemical content of the water. Plants are highly adaptable in this respect, and do well despite the wide variations in water around the country. But if water is highly chlorinated--as your tongue and nose will warn you--it is a good idea to let it stand in a shallow pan for a day so the chlorine will evaporate before you pour it on your plants.

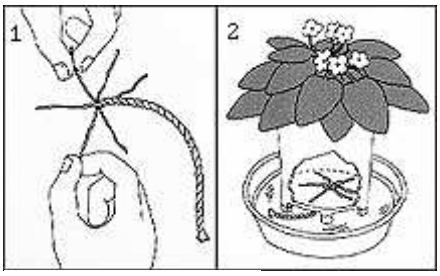
Beware of Chemicals in Water

The very qualities that make chlorine a disinfectant make it somewhat injurious to vegetation. Highly saline water also has a deleterious effect--and if by chance you have any doubt about your water's salinity, check with your local water department. Where salinity is a problem, and the air is relatively clean, you would do well to use rain water, collected in a rain barrel set beneath a rainspout. But rain water in many big cities and in heavily industrialized towns is far from pure. If you live in such a place, let it rain for a few minutes to wash the air clean before you collect the rain water for your plants.

The perfect water for plants is the kind that is low in soluble salts. Water that has passed through certain--but not most--kinds of water-softening devices is also excellent. Most softening units work by substituting sodium for the calcium or magnesium that makes the water hard. If the sodium is not removed, it draws water out of plants and thus proves more harmful to them than the calcium or magnesium of the hard water would be.

Some of the more expensive softening devices are equipped with deionizing units that eliminate the sodium and other harmful salts, and the water that they produce is almost the equivalent of distilled water and is fine for plants. But if you have a water softener without the deionizer, your plants should get rain water or untreated hard water, perhaps from an outside tap that serves the garden hose.

Now to the actual watering of your plants. There are three common methods: watering from the top of the pot, placing water in the saucer or tray in which the pot stands, and immersing the whole pot. It is generally poor advice to suggest that any plant should always be watered the same way. A combination of methods is preferable, as best suits calceolarias and cyclamens, for example. If you water them from the top when there is not enough sunshine to dry them, the crowns of the plants--where the plant's growth emerges at the soil level--become wet and it is not uncommon for decay to set in close to the surface of the soil.



Watering with a Wick

□ **Plants such as African violets, which thrive with constant moisture, can be watered by a glass-fiber wick, which draws water up into the soil. Prepare the wick by unraveling one end so it will cover the bottom of the pot.**

□ **Before potting the plant, insert the wick through the drainage hole of a raised wick-watering pot and spread the unraveled ends flat on the inside. The water in the saucer should cover the wick but not touch the pot.**

But if they--or other plants--obtain all their moisture by soaking up water from saucers, fertilizer salts in the soil will rise to the top, accumulating on the soil's surface and on the top edges of the pots, where they will burn the nearby growth.

African violet (*Saintpulia* 'Rhapsodie Series")

This commonly occurs in African violets, with injury to leaf stems. Occasionally give African violets copious top-of-the-pot watering to leach away the accumulations of fertilizer salts on the surface, but do so only when the air is dry and the weather bright, so that the plants' crowns will not stay wet for too long. This same approach of alternating watering methods works well with almost all house plants.

The third method, immersion of the pot in a pail of tepid water, is time-consuming and laborious, but worth using once in a while because most plants benefit from an occasional thorough soaking. When you use this method, make sure that the water in the pail rises above the soil level in the pot. Immediately, the soil will begin to emit bubbles. When the bubbling stops, take the plant out of the pail and let it drain for 20 minutes before putting it back on its saucer on the window sill.

Whatever method you are using, do the job thoroughly. Do not apply only a little water at a time, because much of the soil deep in the pot is apt to remain dry--and so will some of the roots. But remember that a plant's need for water varies not only with its life cycle but with external conditions: on sunny days plants need more water than they do on cloudy days and even on a curtained window sill they respond to the weather.

Plants that have just been moved to larger pots need less moisture than they will when they have settled down in their new homes and their roots have filled the balls of soil.

Azalea (*Azalea* 'Albert-Elizabeth')

Because the demand for water varies so much, some gardeners use self-watering devices that reduce the frequency of watering and keep the soil uniformly moist for long periods. Wick watering (see drawing, above) uses capillary action to draw water from the container up into the pot.

Some plants that need to be kept constantly moist--azaleas, for example--benefit from wick watering. But the water requirements of most plants vary so much that the wick may provide excess water on dull, cloudy days, and too little on bright, sunny ones. Even experts have had difficulty determining just what size wick will serve which plant best.

There are also several commercial devices that provide a steady supply of moisture, including some that sense how dry the soil is and water accordingly.

Moisture in the air is as important to plants as moisture in their soil. Except for kitchens and bathrooms, most houses in winter are as dry as deserts, and in such arid air house plants never attain their full potential. Indeed, many of them get brown around the edges of the leaves; if dry air draws off enough moisture, the leaves will simply shrivel away. So to increase the humidity--especially in winter--many humidity-loving plants do well by sitting out dry air days in large trays of water. The trays should be about 2 inches deep and can be made of plastic or any painted or nonrusting metal. Cover the bottoms with at least 1 inch of perlite, pebbles or pea-sized granules of charcoal and add water, keeping the level just below the surface of the material selected.

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