

Water use on allotments

First, how to reduce the need to water.

There are several ways to minimise the need to water your plants. We, in Burnside and Vinery, have generally clay soil. This is said by many to be good for retaining water yet, as we all know, the surface can become quite concrete-like after a few days of sunny and dry weather. Dig deeper, however, and in most cases, you should find a decent degree of moisture.

Here are a few tips:

Add mulch to the soil. Some plot-holders add quantities of mulch to break up the solidity of the soil. This does work, though by breaking up the solidity it can lessen moisture retention. Perhaps one of the most effective approaches might be to wait till the soil is wet (either after rain or by watering it) then add mulch – and compost and leaf-mould – and then cover the patch with a tarpaulin, fleece or a good layer of cut vegetation (with no bind weed), until planting time.

Removal of weeds. All plants take up as much water as they can, and weeds are generally quite virulent and demanding. Their removal will eliminate that demand, but you don't want to be left with expanses of open land, so cover it again with a tarpaulin, fleece or cut vegetation. Also, be careful to avoid planting seedlings or young plants close to well-established plants or bushes that will out-compete them for moisture.

Water in the evening. The night-time lack of sunlight will minimise evaporation; watering in the morning or midday is tempting, and often convenient, though if it's sunny it'll evaporate quite quickly. The drawback with evening watering is that it might attract slugs and snails – they can sense it, so you'd best employ some measures to combat said molluscs.

Shading. When planting out young plants in dry and sunny weather it is often advisable to shade them from the sun for their first week, or even two, until they become established. Put some gauze, fleece or close-webbed netting over the patch, but leave the sides open to allow ventilation and prevent over-heating. But out of sight is not out of mind – check them every now and then.

Water the base of plants. Spraying water all over plants can have a minimal, or even negative, effect. Much of the water will evaporate before it gets to where it is needed – the roots. Moreover, in hot sunny weather water on leaves can act as a magnifier causing damage to the leaf. Aim water at the base of the plants where it can reach the roots and be sheltered from evaporation by the leaves.

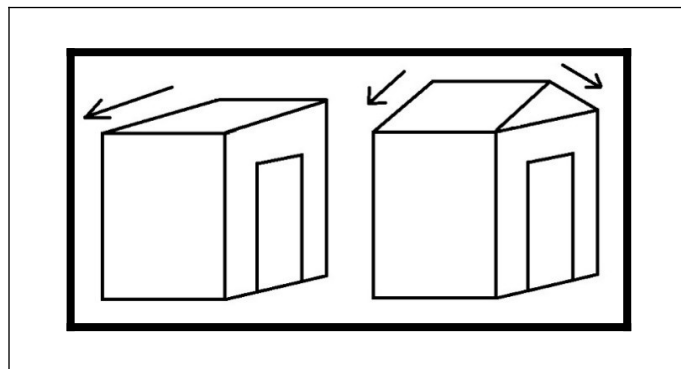
“Puddling”. With some young plants that need to be kept as well-watered as possible (young courgettes, for example), you can push up the earth around them to minimise water running off and away from the roots.

Watering potatoes. This is always a bit of an issue: some say you should, some say no. Hence, in hot and dry weather it might be best to give them enough water to avoid completely drying out, but concentrate more on them when the actual plant (haulm) comes up. They generally don't need watering as much as most other plants, but don't let them dry out.

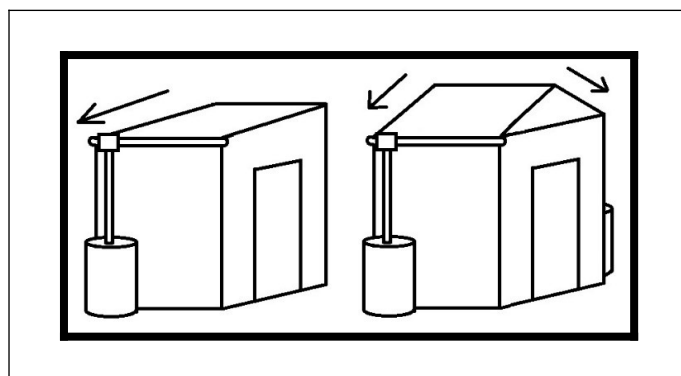
Second, how to collect and store water.

You can, of course, rely solely on the troughs that are strategically placed around the allotments, and many plot-holders do just that. Yet as is becoming ever more apparent, East Anglia, being an economically bullish region, is subject to an increasingly high demand for water whilst supply (rain) seems to be more and more erratic. Measures taken to reduce that demand will help address the overall situation, even if only in a small way.

Water collection. Having a shed in reasonable condition is often the most fundamental necessity. The shed roof should be angled in such a way that rain water is directed either one way:

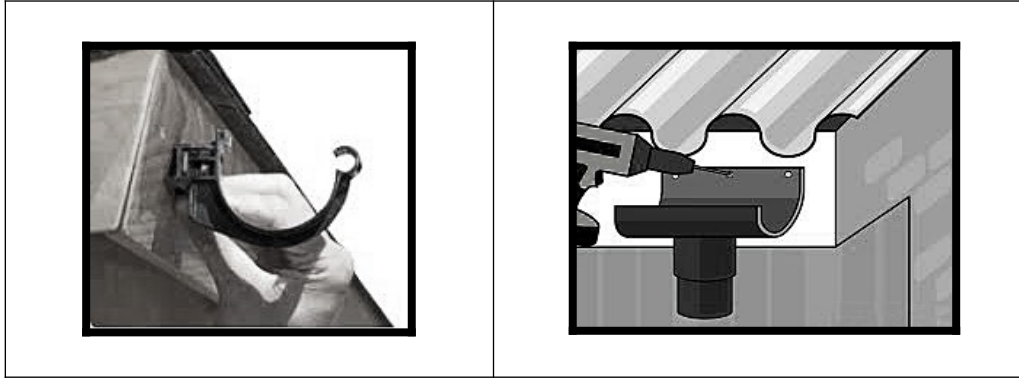


It is best if the roof material is corrugated, to more effectively channel the rain water, but it doesn't have to be. Next, gutters need to be fixed to collect the rain, with a down pipe taking it into a butt.



Attaching guttering to a shed is not a complex business. All you need is the gutter, the stops (end bits), the supports, the junction (the piece that channels the water down) and the pipe, and screws (or nails, though screws are better). You don't need a mechanised screwdriver, a manual

one is often easier to use, particularly with an old shed. Note: when attaching the gutter, have it at a slight slope to channel the water to the junction.



All these bits of equipment are available in hardware shops, and they're not too pricey.

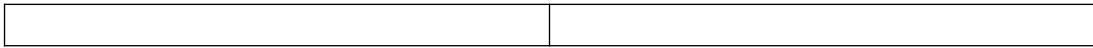
Often, guttering arrangements can be quite rudimentary, such as in these pictures:



The first one shows a shed in less-than-perfect condition, yet the rain water is effectively (just) channelled into the butt. The second one shows that both front and back gutters can be served by one down pipe.

You can get ambitious, as many people do, and have an arrangement of water butts that enables maximised collection, as in the first picture (here efficiently elevated to allow taps). Also, you can erect a free-standing frame, or simply not have a shed, as in the second picture:





Having a tap at the base of the butt can be very useful. Note that the butt will have to be sufficiently raised up to allow a bucket or watering can to get beneath the tap. Note too that the tap should be positioned about 10 centimetres above the base, so as to avoid it getting clogged with any sludge.

However, a butt with no tap is still fine – just dip the bucket in.

It is advisable to cover the butt with either netting, gauze or a solid top to prevent leaves and other matter, and animals, from falling in. A water-butt in the open might be subject to some evaporation. And one last point, especially in hot weather: a solid cap should prevent mosquitoes from breeding.