

It works for me Water

All, yes ALL plants need water. Even drought tolerant plants need water to survive. Drought tolerant does not mean that they never need water. Ah yes I can hear it now – “But I plant my cactus in the ground and never water them and they are doing fine.”

Let’s examine a few factors that may account for the fact that you never water and your plants are doing well.

Where do you live? First scenario – You may live in an area where you have neighbors close by and they may not be cactus lovers so they have a lawn. If that is the case you should thank them for watering your cactus. What is happening is that your cacti are sending out long roots and are enjoying the water that soaks into the ground as a result of the lawn next door being watered.

Second scenario – You may live near the coast/ocean/body of water and often have fog or heavy dew. That moisture condenses on the plants. Some is absorbed by the plant through the areoles and skin of the plant. If any moisture falls on the ground near the plant it is absorbed by the plant’s roots and waters the plant.

There are endless other scenarios that we could explore but the real questions are how do I determine when the plants need water and how do I water in this nursery? Personally I have found that the most reliable water meter is the end of my finger. If the soil around the plant is damp I don’t water. If it is dry I water. If it is a question of whether to water or not I always choose not.

When I say water I mean that the root ball of the plant is completely saturated with water. If the plant is growing in a container, particularly if it happens to be root bound, it will probably have to be watered several times the same day to accomplish this. I prefer to water by hand with a watering wand. This allows me to water each plant individually. The reason for this is that some plants will use more or less water than their neighbor depending on the time of year and a number of other factors. Watering by hand forces me to look at each individual plant. This in turn allows me to evaluate the individual plant’s health, need for fertilizer and check to see if there are any insects or other pathogens that may be attacking the plant.

There are a myriad of factors that affect the amount of water a plant needs so let me briefly discuss some of them starting with seeds and seedlings.

Cactus seeds must be kept damp for germination.

After the seeds germinate they must still be kept moist until the roots are long enough to reach the moisture in the bottom of the seed container.

When the seedlings develop the secondary characteristics, areoles and thorns, the plants are beginning to store water so they can be allowed to briefly dry out.

Generally speaking the larger the plant the longer it will be able to survive without water. Of course temperature, humidity or lack thereof, and sunlight all affect the plant's need for water.

The watering schedule at my nursery is varied according to the time of year and temperature. Generally, during the summer months, the plants are watered weekly. Spring and fall watering schedule is approximately every other week and is often slightly more or less depending on the temperature and rainfall. During the winter months I rarely water the plants after the last week in November and often withhold water until the middle of February. There are several reasons for this long dry period. First, the lack of water will force the plants to stop growing. In our area it is not unusual to have several nights of freezing weather. If the plants are not growing they are less susceptible to freeze damage. The second reason is that the plants will bloom more profusely when the weather warms up and they begin to grow again if they have a dormant period. I use Valentine's Day as the reminder that I need to begin to water. The plants deserve a little tender loving care after that long rest. The days are getting longer and, in most cases, the danger of a severe freeze is past.

I try to water the entire nursery in a couple of days. One week later I water and fertilize the entire nursery using a water soluble, balanced fertilizer. The reason for watering first then fertilizing is the plants are no longer very thirsty so they will take in the fertilizer solution more slowly. If the plants are very dry they will rapidly absorb as much of the water/ fertilizer solution as the plant can hold. This in turn may generate a growth spurt that could cause the epidermis of the plant to split, leave the plant at best scarred and at worst vulnerable to fungus or other pathogens that could kill the plant.

A specimen that is planted in the ground needs to be watered until it is firmly established. In the case of taller plants I suggest that they be watered deeply and regularly for at least the first two years they are in the ground. Deeply here is the key word. Water the plants slowly so that the damp area extends well below the bottom of the longest tap root. This will assure that the plant grows roots long enough to support the plant when it gets tall. As a side benefit is that when you reduce the watering after it is established the plant will have a greater chance of remaining vibrant and healthy.

Of course there are exceptions to all rules and in all cases common sense should prevail. For example some plants that we are from South Africa and grow in our winter. They may need to be watered during the winter. They should also, if possible, be kept warm. In the case of flora that is not from our latitudes try to determine if that particular plant has acclimated to our seasons or not and treat it accordingly.

Last and most important – enjoy your plants.

Harvey

[Link to Mexican Hat Cactus website](#)