

The Importance of Water

Published 5/28/19 – Free public domain image titled “Abandoned House Prairie Old” from snappygoat.com

The existence of signs of water on extra terrestrial planets is one of the first things space explorers look for. The majority of our own planet is covered by water as is the majority of our bodies by weight. The importance of water to all living things is a no-brainer. Obviously plants require water and those that don't get enough usually don't stick around very long. But too much water is just as bad as not enough water for all plants.



When a house plant fails, often the roots have been surrounded by too much water, either through poor (or no) drainage or by overwatering. A natural reaction to many people when they see a plant starting to decline is to give it a drink. If the soil is already saturated and roots are drowning, additional water is the last thing that plant needs. Many house plants are treasured because they were acquired at a wedding, funeral, or as a gift from someone years ago who's now departed. Unfortunately many of the plants sold as funeral plants are either planted in pots that don't have any drain holes or are planted in cheap pots that do have drainage but then placed inside decorative pots lined with a water proof layer of plastic. Certainly the no drainage helps keep the floors of the funeral parlors, churches, etc. dry and clean, and for a short time does no harm to the plants. However after a couple of weeks most plants start showing yellowing leaves, then the leaves drop, stems become limp, and finally rot starts. If it's not too late, the recourse for too much water is to trim off dead and dying parts, replace the soil with new, either add drain holes or replant into a new pot altogether, and water appropriately.

The opposite of too much water is, of course, not enough water. This happens frequently in central South Dakota to outdoor plants. Our natural environment is a short- and mid-grass prairie. The next time this paper prints a “100 years ago today” outdoors picture, notice how few trees are in the background. In natural conditions (i.e., no human help), only trees or shrubs next to permanent water are likely to survive as Mother Nature is constantly trying to turn our environment back into a grassland. So to grow trees and shrubs in our area we must water our plants.

Underground sprinklers for lawns are designed to irrigate the top few inches of ground which is where grasses have their roots. For all trees and shrubs the vast majority of their roots start a couple of inches down and go deeper from there. Lawn sprinklers running for 15 minutes at a time several times a week is a shallow irrigation system and will not adequately water trees or shrubs. Newly planted trees and shrubs, and during hot, dry periods even established plants, need dedicated waterings that distributes the water deeply to the roots. Next week, deep watering options and techniques.

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