

Saco Community Garden Topics: Maintaining Your Planted Garden

Now that all your seedlings and seeds are nestled into a well-weeded, well-fertilized plot, can you rest on your laurels? No! Gardening is like parenting, once you start something you need to take care of it until its final hours. Take heart, gardening doesn't wake you up at night or crash the car.

Watering 101

Seedlings need to be well watered at planting time, and then watered at least one inch of water each week. You can measure what an inch is by placing a tuna can in the garden bed beside your plants. When the tuna can is full, you've watered one inch. Just to be on the safe side, poke your finger into the soil to make sure that water has seeped in at least one inch into the soil. During very hot and dry periods, you will need to water more often, but always water deeply and under the plants instead of over the plants, if you can manage it. You want to get the water to the roots not to the leaves. Damp leaves invite fungal diseases and insect visitors.

New seeds, on the other hand, need to be kept constantly moist until they are sprouted. That usually means daily visits to the garden.

While we're on watering, there are certain hose habits that will help you and help us all maintain the hoses longer. When you uncoil the hose to use it, uncoil and straighten it so that it doesn't have kinks and twists in it. It will be easier to maneuver this way, and easier to coil up when you're done. While you're moving the hose around the SCG take advantage of the corner grade stakes to guide the hose to prevent damage to other gardens. When returning the hose, turn off the water at the faucet, open the wand to drain the hose, and then coil the hose up. An empty hose will coil easier and storing an empty hose prevents pressure damage.

Weeding for pleasure

Weeding is the yoga practice of small plot gardening. Sit on the ground facing your garden, stand over it and reach down, kneel, or scooch—whatever your weeding/yoga position, have a cultivator and collection bucket beside you. Run your fingers and/or cultivator through the soil and feel the health of your garden. Look behind you to see that clean open area you've already done. You can almost hear your seedlings singing.

On a practical level, there are two general kinds of weeding—wet and dry. If you weed the soil when it is bone dry and you have space between your plants, use a sharp hoe to just cut the weeds off below the soil surface and leave their dead bodies for instant compost (as long as they are little and haven't gone to seed). If the soil is wet, you can more easily pluck out weeds and collect them to discard into the compost (disease-free, seed-free weeds). There are drawbacks to both methods. The dry method needs frequent weedings. The wet method must be practiced carefully because your seedlings can be easily bruised when wet. Also, when your garden is wet, it's easier to transmit diseases. Whichever practice you employ, weed often. It gives you a chance to examine your garden on an intimate and regular level.

Thinning is not just for hair

When your seeds poke up through the soil, it is a great source of pride for every gardener. It is also a call to action. Most seedlings need to be separated by some space—check your seed packet. That includes carrots, radishes, beets, beans, etc. Get started! Carefully pull up the

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thinnings so that the plants growing on have as little soil disturbance as possible. Most thinnings are eatable, so take them home and toss them in a salad.

Monitoring

This is something you do while you water, plant, weed and thin. Look at your plants to check that they are healthy and free of pests. It's also a good idea to look under leaves, along stems and at the base of stems as well as on the top. If you find your plants are in trouble, share the news with the other renters. The more people fighting an infestation, the greater everyone's chance of success is in the bad bug wars. One of the NICE things about monitoring is watching your plants grow and ripen to that perfect moment when they are ready to be picked.