

Free yourself from the garden hose

By David W. Marshall*

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Those of us who have done a lot of watering this spring know that while it's not cheap, it costs less than buying new plants. Continue to water when needed, but try to be as efficient as possible.

The first couple of months after planting, the roots of new shrubs, trees and flowers don't grow far out of the rootball they had in the container. Because the soil mix in the nursery container was blended to accommodate good drainage, it is quick to dry out, even after being planted into the landscape. So, you want to make sure you're applying water directly to the rootball of new plants for the first couple of months. If you don't, you will likely lose the plants.

Lawn sprinklers aren't a very efficient means of watering shrubs, trees and flowers. They generally waste too much water. If you're watering by dragging the hose around from plant to plant, you're probably not watering enough. What you need is an easy method for putting water right where it's needed. You also need freedom from the garden hose.

Fortunately there is a relatively inexpensive, easy-to-install method of irrigation designed to place the water where it's needed and free you from lugging hoses around. It's known by a few names: low-volume irrigation, micro-irrigation and drip irrigation.

Several years ago, we installed low-volume irrigation at the Extension Center to get some new plantings started. It was easy to install, and it turned out to be more flexible than an underground system and at a fraction of the cost.

Low-volume irrigation is fairly simple. It involves attaching a flexible black polyethylene hose to your water faucet with a hose fitting. At the faucet you also attach a back-flow-prevention fitting and a pressure-reducing fitting. You then roll the flexible hose through your planting area. You can buy the hose in either half-inch or three-quarter inch sizes. The three-quarter inch is recommended if you have much distance to cover.

At appropriate places off the main hose, you attach the mister nozzles by punching a hole into the main hose. The mister nozzles are attached by running a small spaghetti tube from the main hose to the nozzle. The nozzle is mounted on a plastic stake that sticks in the ground and can easily be moved around.

There are different nozzle types. I like the the ones that put water out in a 180-degree pattern, throwing it out 4 to 6 feet. Other nozzles apply the water almost in a full 360 degrees. There also are nozzles designed to be used at the base of shrubs, applying the

water in a small circle. There's even one nozzle designed to be used in containers, dripping water at a very slow rate.

The beauty of the low-volume irrigation is the ease of installation and the flexibility. The type that I purchased for my own yard uses push-in connections. If I add a new section of planting, I simply take the end cap off the hose, push in a coupler, push on the new section of hose and wind it out. There are even T-couplers that enable you to send new hoses off in two directions. You can use a Y-hose connector at your faucet to send two lines in different directions.

If you decide to move a mister head and its spaghetti tube, there are goof plugs to plug the old hole in the hose. If you accidentally cut the hose, it can be easily repaired. All the types of mister heads I have used have a little knob that allows you to open or close it, giving you the ability to turn off the water to plants that may not need it.

Finding supplies to install low-volume irrigation may be a little tricky. I have bought most of my supplies at Just Fruits & Exotics Nursery in Crawfordville (926-5644). Home Depot and Lowes also sell some of the supplies. Mister Landscaper in Dundee sells a 50-foot starter kit. You can contact Mister Landscaper at (941) 439-3200 or online at mrlandscaper@mrlandscaper.com. If you know other local sources, please e-mail me at davidm@mail.co.leon.fl.us.

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