



### **WATER WISE GARDENING - with flowering annuals.**

Over the past few dry years Australian gardeners have slowly become accustomed to conserving water and adjusting to water restrictions. The sad fact is that as our population grows water will become more and more precious. Permanent water saving measures are now a fact of life and many of us will have to adjust our gardening strategies.

For those of us who look forward to the change of seasons and hence the change of annual flowers in our gardens, the most important facts to remember are, choose the right plant for the right position and to ensure that not too much water is used and that the water used is not wasted.

### **“Flowering annuals don’t need as much water as many people think”**

In fact when you consider their origins and life cycle it becomes clear that many flowering seedlings are ideally suited to Water Wise gardens.

Many seedlings originated in hot dry climates and are very water efficient. Petunia and Portulaca were discovered in South America; Marigolds, Ageratum and Zinnia come from Mexico and Gazania is native to South Africa. All of these plants are recognized as low water users.

Similarly seedlings are naturally tough and opportunistic plants, not the dainty little flowers that many gardeners might perceive. Seedlings are nearly all ‘annuals’ which means they live a complete life cycle in one season. Any plant that has to establish itself, attract pollinators and produce its offspring in anywhere between 6-12 months has to be pretty tough. It’s the ability of annuals to regenerate quickly in tough environments that makes some of them ideal garden plants and some of their close relations wild weedy plants. So take care where you plant Gazania or Cosmos to ensure that they don’t set seeds and escape into the wild. Fortunately the hybridizing process has ironed the invasiveness out of most of our favourite seedlings.

Plants like people have a range of ideal growing conditions. Some people prefer tropical holidays, others are much happier in cool temperate environments. Plants are no different, each plant has an ideal growing environment, the key is to match the right plant to the right site. Impatiens for example, prefer light shade while Portulaca will thrive in dry sunny conditions. Impatiens planted in a hot sunny position will probably survive quite well, but they will use a lot of water to overcome stress. It is most important to give thought to where you are about to plant garden beds or position your containers. Also, consider the time of day when planting tender young seedlings. Early morning or in the late afternoon is best, not in the heat of the midday sun.

### **How much water do my plants need?**

Many of annual plants follow the life cycle of Australian desert wild flowers: establishing quickly following rain, then living the rest of their relatively short lives in harsh dry conditions. Our watering program should match this. Water seedlings in well, and during their first week follow up with 1 or 2 additional waterings, by then your seedlings should have established themselves. Once established most plant varieties grow and flower better when watering is only done as water is needed. The best way to check if your plants need water is to scratch at the soil/potting mix surface, if the soil is damp your plants don’t need water just yet. Most gardeners will achieve better results with the right knowledge about water use.

### **Saving Water.**

Careful Soil Preparation includes digging over, adding compost and mulching. Prepare the soil by digging over well to at least the depth of the spade. Add compost or well rotted animal manure, not only does it improve the water holding capacity of the soil it also adds nutrients. When planting in containers always use good quality potting mix. Add water crystals and wetting agents if they have not been pre-mixed, they are very effective. Mulching helps prevent the soil surface from drying out. Remember healthy soil produces strong and healthy plants.

Colourful gardens are part of our culture and heritage so don’t let water restrictions put you off, adjust and learn to garden with the knowledge that you can and will succeed.