

Watering Tips

By DR. SMITH

Many new houseplant owners struggle with watering. How much water should you give? How often? The answer depends on many factors: potting media, plant species, pot type, lighting, airflow, and more. It can feel overwhelming—but there are a few tricks to help demystify the process.

If you're just getting started, I recommend buying a soil moisture meter. I use mine for larger hanging baskets that are hard to check by touch. These meters are affordable (mine also measures light and pH), and they help you learn what different moisture levels feel like.

The range you'll aim for depends on your plant's needs. Succulents, for instance, don't like having "wet feet" all the time—let their soil dry out completely between waterings. I like to use porous pots like terracotta for root-rot-prone plants to help the media dry faster. I also wait until the soil starts pulling away from the sides of the pot before watering.

Pro tip: Most beginners kill plants by overwatering. It's usually better to underwater than to overdo it.



Watering can used for top-watering.



Inexpensive 3-in-1 soil and light meter.

I keep most of my 60+ houseplants in terracotta pots, with a few exceptions. Terracotta isn't ideal for plants that wilt quickly during dry spells—my peace lily, for example, lives in a plastic pot and may eventually move into a glazed ceramic one. My orchid lives in glazed ceramic too, where higher humidity helps its roots thrive.

Speaking of pots—make sure they have drainage! If your pot doesn't drain, you'll need to be extra careful not to exceed the holding capacity of the potting mix. After watering, tip the pot gently to drain excess water. Otherwise, you'll create an anoxic (low oxygen) zone at the bottom, where anaerobic microbes can start munching on your plant roots.



What happens when you add pebbles.

Should you add pebbles for drainage? Nope! It sounds logical, but pebbles actually raise the water table in your pot. Potting mix retains water more effectively than gravel, so water will stay perched just above the pebble layer, creating a stagnant zone. That means more root rot risk and less room for roots to grow.

The only time I use a pebble is to cover a large drainage hole so soil doesn't fall through—just one pebble, no more.

You can also test soil moisture with your fingers. Pinch the top half-inch of soil: if it feels wet or sticky, back away with that watering can! For bigger pots, you may need to poke deeper or use your moisture meter as a reference.

Terracotta pots are great for beginners because they show moisture levels—darker outside = wetter inside. You might also see fungal growth if things are too wet.



Even plants enjoy a good bath.

Once your potting mix is dry and your plant is thirsty, you've got a few options.

Top-watering: This is the most common method—just pour water from a can or faucet. Go slow! If you pour too quickly, water will follow preferential paths and bypass dry parts of the soil. Fast flooding can also wash away nutrients as the water grabs hold of charged particles.

Small or delicate plants (like baby succulents) do best with a squeeze bottle, not a full-size watering can.



Add fertilizer and coffee grounds during the growing season.



A baby succulent needs a gentle watering method.

Bottom-watering (soaking): This is one of my favorite methods. Place your plant pot in a larger container or sink filled with water. The soil will wick up water from below over 10 minutes to an hour. Once the top of the soil looks moist, remove the plant and let it drain.

Why I love bottom-watering:

- It avoids wetting foliage, reducing risk of fungal or bacterial issues
- It fully saturates the potting mix
- You can water multiple plants at once in the same basin

All plants—from succulents to Maidenhair ferns—need a deep soak now and then. The key difference between them is *how often* you water, not how thoroughly.

Important note: Bottom-watering doesn't flush salts from the potting mix. If you fertilize regularly or

have hard water, rotate in some top-watering to wash away salt buildup. I bottom-water most of my plants once or twice a month, then top-water in between.

Other watering options: Wicking and water bulbs are great for vacations! Just be cautious using them long-term with succulents or root-rot-prone plants, since they keep soil constantly moist. But for ferns or humidity-loving drama queens? Total lifesavers.

Until next time: remember to stop worrying and learn to love the greenery!
