



Winter Watering Guide for Herbaceous Perennials and Shrubs in Utah

A Beginner-Friendly Guide to Keeping New Perennials Alive During Dry Winter Months

When winter arrives in Utah, automated sprinkler systems are shut off and drained to prevent freezing. However, winter weather in Utah is notoriously dry, and soft snowfall often melts into very little soil moisture. If dry, windy stretches occur without snow cover or a significant rain event, newly planted perennials can desiccate and die. Following a few simple guidelines will help your landscape survive until spring!

1. When & How Much to Water in Winter

During dry fall and winter months without rain or snow cover, your watering schedule depends heavily on whether plants are newly established or dormant.

Plant Category	Water Need (Inches / Schedule)	Key Details
Newly Planted Perennials (1–2 Seasons)	½ to 1 inch per week during early fall; 1 to 2 soakings per month in dry winter periods.	Root systems are small and shallow, making them vulnerable to drying out during long dry spells.
Established Herbaceous Perennials	Minimal to none (1 soaking per month during extended droughts).	Top growth dies back completely to the ground; deep roots stay dormant and store moisture efficiently.
Evergreen Perennials & Broadleaf Evergreen Shrubs	1 to 1½ inches per week equivalent in dry periods (soak every 2–3 weeks in winter).	Leaves keep transpiring water all winter, especially on sunny or windy Utah days.

**Note on Gallons: 1 inch of water over a 1-square-foot root ball area equals roughly 0.6 gallons. A 1-gallon jug poured slowly over a perennial's root ball provides approximately 1.5 inches of deep hydration.*

2. Quick Steps

- **Check Air Temperature:** Always check the thermometer before watering. Only apply water when air and soil temperatures are **above 40°F** during midday so water can soak in

before freezing temperatures hit at night [cite: 1.1.1].

- **Disconnect & Drain Hoses:** Never leave a hose attached to your outdoor spigot/hose bib during winter, as this can freeze and burst your home's pipes. Always detach and store the hose immediately after hand watering.
- **The Bucket Trick:** Drill a tiny hole in the bottom of a 5-gallon bucket, place it over the root ball, fill with water, and let it slowly seep into the soil without runoff [cite: 1.1.3].

3. Herbaceous vs. Evergreen Plants in Winter

Understanding plant biology makes it easy to see why water requirements differ across plant types:

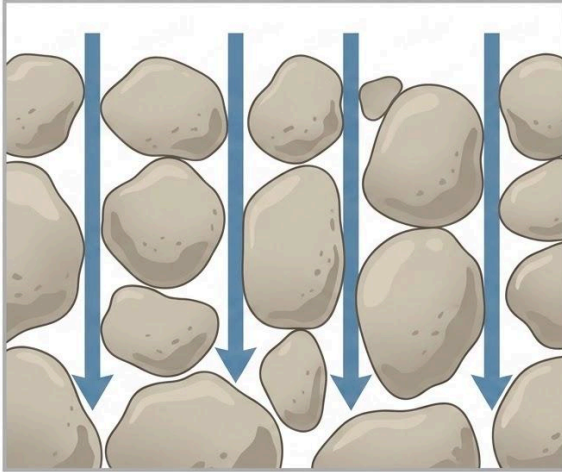
- **Herbaceous Perennials:** Species like Prairie Coneflower, Utah Sweetvetch, and Desert Four O'Clock drop their stems and foliage completely to the ground in winter. They enter true dormancy, halting water loss above ground. Their main concern is preventing roots from totally drying out during prolonged winter droughts.
- **Evergreen Perennials & Shrubs:** Plants like Palmer's Penstemon, Sulfur-Flowered Buckwheat, Mountain Mahogany, and Broom Snakeweed retain their foliage year-round. On bright, sunny Utah winter days or during strong canyon winds, green foliage continues to lose moisture through transpiration. If the surrounding soil is bone dry or frozen solid, roots cannot replenish lost water, causing evergreen needles and foliage to scorch or drop.

4. Soil Types & Air Temperature Effects in Utah

Utah soils and extreme thermal shifts play a major role in moisture retention:

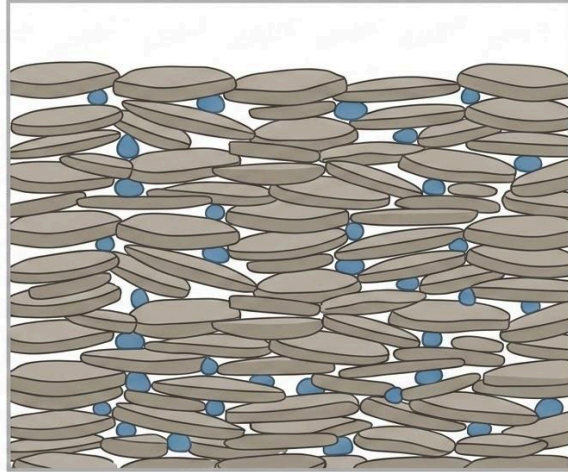
Factor	Characteristics	Impact on Winter Watering
Sandy Soil	Large particles, high drainage, low water holding capacity	Water drains rapidly. Plants in sandy soils need smaller, more frequent waterings because soil dries out quickly.
Clay Soil	Fine particles, slow drainage, high water retention	Holds water for long periods. Avoid overwatering, as standing water around roots can cause root rot. Water slowly and less often.
Air Temp & Freeze/Thaw	Warm winter days thaw topsoil; cold nights freeze surface layers.	When topsoil thaws during 40°F+ sunny afternoons, root systems become active and absorb moisture. Water applied in midday reaches roots effectively before night freezes.

SANDY SOIL



HIGH DRAINAGE: WATER MOVES RAPIDLY THROUGH GAPS

CLAY SOIL



HIGH WATER RETENTION: WATER DROPS ARE HELD BETWEEN PARTICLES

5. Simple Summary Checklist for New Gardeners

1. **Observe Snowfall:** Soft snow melts into very little water. If there is no snow cover for 3–4 weeks in winter, plan to hand water.
2. **Check Soil Moisture:** Push a screwdriver 3 inches into the soil near the root ball. If it comes out dry and hard to push, water is needed.
3. **Apply A Mulch:** Maintain a 2–3 inch layer of organic mulch (can be compost) around the base of plants to regulate soil temperature and prevent rapid moisture evaporation.
4. **Disconnect Hose:** Store hoses away after each winter soak to prevent frozen pipes!