



Using Ancient Ollas for School Garden Irrigation

By UC Master Gardener, Janice Winsby

Sometimes there is a raised bed or other planted spot in a garden that is far from an irrigation source. There is a simple solution to that problem: Ollas!

An olla (pronounced “oy-ah”) is an unglazed clay pot that is buried in the garden bed and filled from the top with water. The neck of the pot is exposed to make filling easy, and covered to prevent evaporation (as well as keep out dirt and mosquitos). Ollas have been in use as a watering tool for thousands of years—mostly in Africa and Asia. They came to The Americas via the Spanish Conquistadors. The name, “olla”, is Spanish for pot. They have other names in other countries.

The way ollas work is simple. Water is pulled from the olla by the roots from of nearby plants. As long as the olla remains at least half-full of water, the surrounding soil is kept perfectly moist. It is an extremely efficient system because the plants take only as much water as they need, and the soil surface remains dry—discouraging weed growth or water loss from evaporation.

To install an Olla, dig a hole deep enough so that a couple inches of the pot’s neck will remain exposed at the top once it’s buried.

Measure the diameter of the olla and multiply by two. That will be the diameter of the circle that the olla can keep well-watered. Cut a string to that length if you don’t have a measuring tape handy.

Fill in with a good planting mix around the olla and firmly pat down the soil so there is no airspace left around the olla.

Lay the string across the top of the olla and draw the circle around the olla where your planting will be.

Plant your seedlings within that circle and water them in well from above. It will take a couple of weeks for the plants to develop enough roots to use the water from the olla, so for that time, keep the soil moist with overhead watering.



Check the olla daily to see if it needs refilling. Remember it needs to always stay at least half-full. Once your plants are established, and depending on the weather, you will need to fill it 1-3 times per week.

An Olla will keep the soil perfectly moist in an area approximately twice its diameter. In the photo to the right, the larger olla is 15” high X 12” wide.



In the photos above, UC Master Gardener Janice Winsby demonstrates the process of installing the Olla pots in Sun Terrace Elementary School garden, Concord CA. Photo credit: Soubarna