HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

WATERING THE LAWN

With the temperatures rising and no rain, your lawn may need some relief. Watering the lawn does not mean just turning on the sprinklers. Knowing when the lawn needs water and how much water to apply is essential for its long-term health.

First everyone should be familiar with how to use the sprinkler system. This includes how to turn it on and off and how to set the timer. By having control of the sprinkler system, you will have a lot more control of the watering schedule.

Lawns tend to get a lot of grief about their water use. However, it is not the lawns, it is the operator. As the operators, we can train the lawns to require less water by just knowing when and how much to water. Not only will this save on the water bill, but it will also make the lawns healthier in the long run.

Water lawns as needed. Frequent waterings cause shallow root systems, which can cause problems for the lawn in times of drought. Less frequent and sufficient waterings that allow the lawns to dry out create deeper, healthier root systems.

Telling when the lawns need water is simple. The lawns will tell you. There are three signs to look for. One is the color of the lawn. It will turn a bluish-green color when water is needed. The leaf blades of the lawn will also begin to fold like a book. And when you walk through the lawn, footprints will remain in the lawn where you have walked.

When you notice these signs, it is time to water. Three quarters to one inch of water should be applied per application. The length of time you should run your sprinkler system to apply this amount varies from one irrigation system to another. Calibration of the irrigation system should be carried out in order to determine how long to run the sprinklers.

To calibrate the irrigation system, place empty tuna cans (or similar size) throughout the lawn to collect the water. Turn on the sprinklers for 15 minutes. Collect the water in the tuna cans and measure the combined amount. Divide that number by the number of cans to find the average amount of water in each can. This is the amount of water applied to the lawn in a 15-minute interval. From there, determine how long the sprinklers need to run in order to apply ¾ to 1-inch of water per application. For example, if the average amount of water applied to the
lawn in 15 minutes were ½ inch, the irrigation system would need to run 30 minutes in order to apply 1 inch of water.

After a week or so of watching the lawn and watering as needed you will be able to adjust the timer on the irrigation system to turn on automatically. For instance, you may notice that in the spring, the lawn needs to be watered approximately every 3 days, so you can set the system to turn on during that interval.

Remember that the water requirements of the lawn will differ throughout the year. Obviously, in the summer more water is required than in the winter when it is cooler and the grass is dormant. Therefore, the irrigation system will need to be adjusted accordingly from season to season.

The best time to water the lawn is in the early morning between 4-10am. By watering in the afternoon, water is lost to evaporation and wind. By watering in the evening hours, the water remains on the leaf blades of all night, which can cause disease to set in. Also, make sure that you have a properly installed and working rain sensor on the irrigation system. This device will turn off the sprinklers when it is raining.

Proper irrigation is essential for the long-term health of the lawn. Over irrigation can cause shallow, weak root systems and disease problems. Under irrigation can cause the lawn to turn brown, die out and the weeds to move in.

The article from the UF/IFAS EDIS database "Watering Your Florida Lawn" will give further information.

For more information on lawn care or other plant questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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