In November of 2001, St. Johns River Water Management District authorities predicted that Central Florida would run out of drinkable water in 2006 (Orlando Sentinel, 11/27/01). At the time, this sounded astonishing, however, with the growth and water shortages during that time, it was a possibility. We were all worried about conserving water - that was until the overwhelming abundance of water we had during the hurricane season of 2004. Then water shortages were the least of our worries.

Today, we just experienced one of the driest months on record. Again, this current rainfall deficit of over 5 inches causes alarm and the rush to get the message out about water conservation is in full swing once more. This ongoing drought and water conservation are hot topics in the news today, but how do you actually save water? You can begin by conserving water in the home landscape. By following a few landscape management tips you will be able to save water and, consequently, money.

All plants need some water. It is required for seed germination and plant growth, yet knowing the proper procedures on how and when to water your landscape can significantly reduce your water usage. Many of us get into the practice of setting the timer on our sprinklers and letting them do the work, but does your plants need water every time the irrigation comes on? Irrigating plants only when they need water is the first step of water conservation in the landscape.

In the summer, established plants need to be watered every 3 to 5 days. Three-fourths of an inch of water should be applied during each application. This amount of water will penetrate 9 inches into the soil. Now, this is just a general rule. Plants in the shade or in poorly drained areas may need watered less and plants in sunny areas with sandy soils may need to be watered more often. Monitoring the plants is the best way to determine their watering needs.

Many landscape plants will express their need for water by wilting, although some will show no early symptoms of drought stress. Instead, they will show injury symptoms, such as browning leaf margins or leaf drop, after extensive drought conditions. Lawns will turn a dull bluish-gray color and the grass leaves will curl at the edges when water is needed. When these symptoms begin to develop, it is time to water.

Plants prefer deep, thorough water applications, rather than frequent, light sprinklings. Frequent, light sprinklings waste water and do little to satisfy the water requirements of a plant growing in hot, dry soil. It also prohibits the plants from developing deep roots systems, which are required for them to survive longer periods without water.

You may need to calibrate your sprinkler system in order to supply the landscape plants with ¾ of an inch of water they need per application. Information on how to do this is available through the Osceola County Extension Service.

The best time of day to water is in the morning hours between 4am and 10am when wind and temperature levels are low. Irrigating during the hot afternoon will result in an increase of water loss from evaporation and irrigating in the late evening can cause an increase in foliar diseases of the plants. Also, be aware of local forecasts before watering. Try to use Mother Nature for irrigation as much as possible. Installing a rain gauge on your irrigation system will prevent your system from turning on during a rainstorm, hence saving you water and money. They are available from your local garden supply store and are quite inexpensive.

A few other landscape tips for conserving water, include:
Increase mowing height of lawns to allow plants to develop deeper root systems.
Control weeds. Weeds use water that would otherwise be available for desirable plants.
Reduce fertilizer applications. Fertilizer promotes plant growth, increasing the need for water.
Use 2-3 inches of mulch on landscape beds. Mulch reduces water evaporation from the soil.
Adjust sprinklers to avoid spraying water on sidewalks or streets. Fix any sprinklers that are not working correctly.
Don't waste water caring for marginal or undesirable plants.
Extend the number of days between water applications to the longest suitable interval.
Use drought-resistant plants. Many Florida-native plants are drought tolerant and do well in the sandy soils; after all they "know the land".

By following just a few simple steps, you can do your part for water conservation. For more information on conserving water, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your plant questions on Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm.

See also "Coping with Drought in the Landscape" from the UF/IFAS EDIS database.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: April 9, 2006