

Beat the Heat Landscaping Practices

In recent weeks we have been experiencing high day time temperatures between the mid 80's and the 90's and the lack of good rain fall in our area. We can blame it on El Nino, La Nina or some other global phenomenon. Whatever the cause, the fact is that our landscapes need water. Our irrigation systems seem to be busy now more than ever. But stop! Don't you know that there is a water restriction in place; residents should only irrigate on days based on an odd/even address prescribed by your local government.

Do you have an action plan on how you are going to keep your plants surviving in a time of drought? I would encourage you to start drought-proofing your landscape now so that it can survive with little to no supplemental water this summer. First, consider what areas require the most water and think of ways you can reduce the water use. For instance, an irrigated area might be replaced with some large beds of drought-tolerant ground covers, such as spreading junipers. Mulch can replace turf or ground cover in shady areas and places that are difficult to grow grass. Also, conserve moisture in your ornamental and vegetable plant beds by spreading mulch 3 to 4 inches thick in borders, beds and around the base of landscape plants and trees. When choosing mulch it is important to select good organic mulch such as melaleuca or pine bark over inorganic mulch such as pebbles or rubber; inorganic mulch suppress weeds but do not conserve moisture in the soil. Inorganic mulch reflects solar radiation and generates heat.

I know many of your lawns are beautiful and I am sure you want to keep them that way. Well, if your lawn is not the way you want it, you should contact the UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola County. In order to keep a beautiful lawn you first must know what type of grass is in your lawn. This is important because each grass has a different mowing height. For instance St. Augustine grass should be mowed between 3-4 inches and Bahia at 2-3 inches. During a drought it is important that you reduce the mowing frequency and keep the grass height at the upper mowing limit. For example if you mowed once per week during the rainy season at 3 inches high, now you should mow every other week at 4 inches high. Mowing increases the water requirement of turf grass. Avoid scalping of the turf as this practice will increase stress on the grass and result in higher water requirements and weak grass.

In addition, reduce the number of fertilizer applications during the drought period. Please bear in mind that fertilizer promotes growth of new shoots and subsequently increases the water requirement. Also, always remember to irrigate deeply twice per week; this means that you should apply ½ to ¾ inch of water per application. The best time to irrigate is between 10 pm and 10 am before the warm day sun; watering at night encourages diseases while too much water is lost to evaporation during mid-day watering.

Finally, in your next landscape design, consider the following; right plant at the right place, choose low maintenance plants, group plants according to their water needs and always use organic mulch.

For more information on landscaping and other related horticulture topics, contact Grantly Ricketts with UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola County at 321-697-3000 or email gricketts@ufl.edu.