HORTICULTURE COLUMN

EFFICIENT WATERING

The little bit of rain hasn’t done much to quench our thirsty soils. Supplemental watering may still be necessary to save our lawns, fruit trees and some landscape plants which young or not drought tolerant. Water properly to conserve water and save on your water bill.

The amount of water to apply at any one time varies with the amount of water present in the soil, the water-holding capacity of the soil, and drainage characteristics. Efficient watering wets only the root zone, does not saturate the soil, and does not allow water to run off.

Native Central Florida soils are typically sandy and hold 1" of water in the top 12" of soil. If the roots are in the top 12" of soil and the soil is dry, then ¾–1" of water is required to wet the area thoroughly. This is equivalent to 465-620 gallons of water for each 1000 square feet of lawn.

Some fill soils are fine and compacted so they don’t allow water to flow through very well. They may stay wet for a long time and get gooey if you can ever get them wet. It is often best to remove this soil from flower beds before planting and replace it with more suitable soil which drains well.

Since lawn grasses and shrubs don’t use water at the same rate, it is best to have separate irrigation zones or use sprinklers to water the plants separately. Depending on the size, age and type of landscape plant, lawns may require more frequent watering than trees and shrubs.

Generally, lawn grasses require no more than 0.3" of water per day. Under extreme summer conditions, water use can be as high as 0.4" of water per day. During the winter when grasses are not actively growing, water use can be as little as 0.05" of water per day.

A simple watering schedule would be to apply ¾" of water when the grass shows wilt symptoms as discussed earlier. Once this ¾" of water is applied, do not apply any more until water stress symptoms are seen again. Typically lawns only need to be watered every 3 to 5 days until September, then adjusting to once every 10-14 days in the winter. If rainfall occurs, irrigation should be adjusted according to the rainfall amount.

Water should never be applied at a rate faster than it can be absorbed by the soil. If the sprinkler applies too much water, it runs off, and is wasted. This seldom happens with small sprinklers unless the lawn is thick or the soil compacted.

Avoid extremes in watering frequency and amount. Light, frequent watering is inefficient and encourages shallow root systems and weeds. Excessive irrigation, which keeps the root system saturated with water, is harmful to the lawn, expensive and wastes water not needed by plants. Roots need a balance of water and air to function and grow properly.

Underwatering of turf is obvious by wilting of the leaves, but overwatering is not so obvious and may show up in numerous ways. Excessive thatch buildup and constantly wet turf are signs of overwatering. The presence of pennywort, also known as dollarweed, and sedges indicate too much water is being applied. Disease and other pests may invade the lawn under this situation. Root rot disease is often a problem when the soil is too wet.

The time of watering is important. The best time for irrigation is in the early morning hours. Watering during the day wastes water through evaporation. Watering in late afternoon or late morning may be detrimental if it extends the time plant leaves are naturally wet from dew. Irrigation should be scheduled to avoid peak residential water demand if using municipal water.
Plants need water to grow, but improper watering can be harmful to their health. Follow proper watering recommendations for good growth and to conserve our precious water supply.

Support our 4-H Clubs this weekend. The annual 4-H Orchid Sale will be held today beginning at 9 AM at the Agricultural Center on Highway 192 next to the rodeo grounds between Kissimmee and St. Cloud, at the Winn Dixie Stores in St. Cloud and at Big Lots in the Mill Creek Mall. Phalaenopsis orchids are available for $12. Come early for the best selection.

Proceeds go to support a variety of youth development projects in our county. Help our local youth and get a colorful, low care plant for a gift, for your home or shaded patio. Care information is included with each plant. For more information about 4-H, contact Joy Borgman, 4-H Agent at (321) 697-3000 or check out our website at: http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu.

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Date: April 13th, 2000