

## **Coping with drought**

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It's happening again -- the long dry season before the rains begin. What is a person to do? The best way to cope with this yearly dry season is to practice water conservation all year long. To do this right you need to know when to water and how much to water.

Most landscape plants show their need for water by wilting. If they continue to wilt during the evening, they need water. If the soil is wet, don't water. The plant may have root rot. When plants show wilt, it is best to water them the following morning by giving them a good soaking. A good soaking means that you apply 1/2 to 3/4 inch of water. Watering in this way will promote strong, deep root systems that are capable of withstanding drought. Whereas, if you frequently apply light sprinklings of water the root system will be shallow, weak and unable to withstand drought.

Since weeds compete with plants for water and nutrients, be sure to pull those weeds out. Better yet, use mulch. Mulch suppresses weeds, prevents water loss from the soil, provides a more uniform soil temperature (insulates the soil), and adds organic matter to the soil as it decomposes, thus improving the quality of the soil. Also, mulched plants grow additional roots in the mulch and therefore have more roots than un-mulched plants.

Now, what about fertilizer? Should you be applying fertilizer during a drought? Fertilizer forces growth and increases water needs. It also produces new tender growth that cannot withstand drought. It is best to wait until the drought is over before fertilizing.

Since St. Augustine lawn grass can be the largest consumer of water in the landscape, try to minimize areas using this grass. Determine how much grass is actually needed for children, pets and recreation. Replace the rest of the turf areas with low maintenance ground covers, shrubs and trees suited to the area, or mulch. Of course, it is best to put in new plants when rainfall or water is plentiful.

What is the best way to prepare for future droughts? Choose plants according to your site's conditions. Use drought-tolerant plants where needed. If you have a seasonal wet spot (standing water in summer and dry the rest of the year), select a plant that can take both drought and flood. Group plants by their watering needs, water plants only when they need it, and water deeply (1/2 to 3/4 inch). Minimize turf areas. Watering grass 3/4 of an inch once a week is usually plenty; woody landscape plants can go longer without water. In the winter, cut back on how often you water.

If the drought gets severe and water use is so restricted that landscape plant survival is in question, here are some drastic measures that you can do to save your plants:

- Water plants only when they start to wilt.
- Prune plants severely to reduce leaf area.
- Remove weak plants.
- Thin dense beds of plants to reduce competition among plants, pull out weeds.
- For Bahia grass lawns, stop watering and allow the grass to go dormant. Bahia grass will turn brown, but will recover well once the rains resume.

For a list of drought tolerant plants or help with plant selection, call your local Master Gardeners at the Manatee County Extension Service (an “extension” of the University of Florida/IFAS). Master Gardeners are available Monday-Friday from 9 AM to 4 PM and can be reached by calling 722-4524. Visit our website at: <http://manatee.ifas.ufl.edu>.