

When's My Next Drink?

by Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Agent

It's happening again -- the long dry season before the rains begin. In the winter months, the days are short and cool and plants don't need much water. In the summer, we usually get plenty of rain to satisfy plants water needs. April, May and October are usually the months when our plants are under water stress. What is a person to do? The best way to cope with these normally occurring dry seasons is to practice water conservation before the dry season begins. To do this correctly you need to know when to water and how much water to apply.

Many landscape plants show their need for water by wilting. If they continue to wilt during the evening, they need water. When they show this evening 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 (this may not be possible if the soil is heavily compacted). Watering in this way will promote strong, deep root systems that are capable of withstanding drought. If you frequently apply light sprinklings of water, the root system will be shallow, weak and unable to withstand drought. Over-watering can also cause wilt symptoms. If the root system is smothered by too much water (saturated soil), it is likely to get rot. Once the root system is rotted it cannot take in water and the plant will wilt.

Since weeds compete with plants for water and nutrients, be sure to pull those weeds out. Better yet, use organic mulch, not stones. Mulch suppresses weeds, prevents water loss from the soil, provides a more uniform temperature (insulates the soil), and adds organic matter to the soil as it decomposes. Also, mulched plants grow additional roots in the mulch and therefore have more roots than unmulched plants.

Now, what about fertilizer? Should you be applying nitrogen fertilizer during a drought? Fertilizer stimulates 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 turf grass is the single largest consumer of water in the landscape, try to minimize turf areas. 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, mulch or other porous surfaces. Of course, it is usually best to put in new plants when rainfall is plentiful.

Every year we have a drought season, but some years are worse than others. What is the best way to prepare for these droughts? Plant a yard that will survive on normal rainfall (native plants are great), 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, or consider using drought-tolerant Bahia grass (needs acidic soil).

If the drought gets so 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.
- Use mulch.
- 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 answers to your gardening questions, call the University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Service at 722-4524 and ask to speak to a **Master Gardener** (available Monday-Friday, 9 AM to 4 PM). We have lots of **FREE** publications to help you. To attend a **FREE** class on “Micro & Landscape Irrigation” call the same number and ask for Cheryl.

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