SAVE WATER WITH proper Landscape Maintenance Practices

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Many landscape maintenance practices help conserve water, which is not only good for the plants and the pocketbook, but perhaps more importantly, for the environment. In many urban areas, as much as 25 percent of the water supply is used for landscape irrigation. A common statistic for residential water use in Texas is an average of 6,000 gallons per household in January; in July it is a whopping 16,000 gallons. The difference is landscape irrigation.

Proper watering in the landscape is one of the most elusive practices to grab hold of. Yet, knowing when to water and for how long is fundamental to maintaining a quality landscape while using water efficiently.

The key to proper watering is to apply the water as infrequently as possible, yet to water thoroughly. Most established trees and shrubs only need a twice a month thorough watering during the growing season when there is not adequate rain. Proper watering encourages the development of a healthy and large root system and results in more drought tolerant plants.

Newly planted trees and shrubs will need more frequent watering from the planting time until they are well-rooted. During this establishment period, plants can be gradually weaned to less frequent watering. Start with daily watering for the first couple weeks, then switch to every other day, then increase the interval by a day or two every two to three weeks.

Fruiting plants are an exception, they need more frequent watering than those not producing fruit, and the water should be applied on a regular schedule while the fruit is growing.

Of the tremendous amounts of water applied to lawns and gardens, much of it is never absorbed by the plants and put to use. Some water is lost to runoff by being applied faster than the soil can absorb it, some water evaporates from exposed, unmulched soil before it can be used by the plant, and some moves down below the root zone and finds its way into our coastal waters. The greatest waste of water is when it is applied too often.

Keep in mind that more plants are killed by too much water than by too little! If in doubt about whether the plants can go another day before being watered, wait another day. Even if it results in a little wilting, it won’t hurt established plants.

Most lawns receive twice as much water as they require for a healthy appearance. It is best to not water by the calendar, for example, once a week. It is better to water when the plant needs watering. Most gardeners can readily recognize plant stress symptoms due to lack of water, such as wilting and yellowing.

Along with proper watering, other landscape maintenance practices can result in water savings. Mulching, mowing, and fertilizing greatly impact the water efficiency of any landscape, as well as its ability to survive a drought. Research at Texas A&M University has shown that unmulched soil may lose twice as much water to evaporation as mulched soil.

Mulch is a layer of material covering the soil surface around plants. Mulches can be organic materials, such as shredded bark, compost and wood chips; or inorganic materials, such as gravel, limestone and woven plastic. Apply a layer two to four inches deep. It is very important to keep all mulch several inches away from the plant stem or trunk to prevent rot.

Use mulch wherever possible. Mulch preserves soil moisture, prevents soil compaction, moderates soil temperatures and reduces weeds. In case weeds do get a start, they are much easier to pull when mulch has been used.

Mowing turfgrass at the proper height also helps conserve moisture. The optimum height to mow St. Augustine grass for water conservation is three inches, although the typical mowing height is two to two and one-half inches. However, the taller height promotes a deeper, more water efficient root system. Taller grass also acts as a living mulch, shading the ground, which reduces moisture evaporation from the soil. Also grass that is allowed to grow taller grows slower; therefore, needing less water and mowing.

Other cultural practices that add to the efficient use of water by plants are periodic checks of the irrigation system, elimination of water-demanding weeds and keeping plants as healthy as possible.