

## Proper Landscape and Garden Watering

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

Well it is almost here; the heat that is. I guess we can also say, here we go again. The long hot season of trying to keep our gardens and lawns alive while the Texas sun does its best to dehydrate and kill everything it can. If our sun was not enough, we also get that lovely hot dry wind. That alone is enough to wilt most plants. In previous articles I and other Master Gardeners have tried to provide advice on the best way to prepare your plant beds, how to mulch, fertilize, and select the right plant material to try and counteract these withering twins of wind and sun. Even if you do all those things right, plants still need one more key thing if they are to survive and that is water. Some need less, some more depending on what you chose to plant and where it is planted.

Knowing how much, and when to water is probably one of the most difficult of skills to master when gardening in our challenging environment. More water is not always the answer because it is possible to over water. You must learn to read the clues your plants are giving you. I came across the following guidelines when wandering through the Aggie Horticulture website. They were written by Dr. Douglas F. Welsh a Horticulturist from Texas A&M University and the "Head" Master Gardener in the State. The following suggestions are from him.

Never water strictly by the calendar. We don't drink water 'every ten minutes' or 'every hour', so why should plants be watered 'every two days' or 'once a week'? Instead, learn to recognize dry plants and soil and use these as your tip-off for watering. Too many factors determine how fast a soil dries for us to put watering on a regular basis.

When the plants are dry, water thoroughly. Water lawns so that the soil will be wet several inches down, to encourage deep rooting and drought tolerance. One of the worst mistakes people make in their gardens is trying to 'sprinkle' them each day by using their thumb and the end of a running hose. Most gardeners just don't have the patience to stand in one spot long enough for deep water penetration.

Water trees by taking the sprinkler off the end of the hose and letting water run slowly for several hours out under the drip line (not near the trunk). Be sure that runoff does not occur.

Most plants should be watered in the morning. Evening watering increases the likelihood of disease invasion, as the majority of diseases develop most rapidly in cool, moist conditions.

While watering your lawn, try to keep water off the leaves of trees and shrubs as much as possible. This is especially important for such plants as crape myrtle and roses, which are troubled by leaf diseases which spread rapidly on wet surfaces.

Symptoms for plants which have been kept too wet are about the same for those kept too dry. Roots in waterlogged soils die and do not take up water, so plants wilt and turn yellow. Try not to water a drowning plant!

Organic matter, such as shredded pine bark and composted manure can increase water absorption when they are worked into our native soil. To keep moisture in the soil, use a thick mulch, such as shredded pine bark, grass clippings or tree leaves. In addition to reducing evaporation, mulches also keep the soil cooler and make weed pulling much easier.

Be especially careful to keep newly planted trees and shrubs well watered. Their developing root systems are sensitive to under- and over-watering. But again don't drown them.

Always soak chemical fertilizers into the soil immediately after application. These materials are excellent sources of plant foods, but they are also salts, and can pull water out of plant tissues, resulting in burn, unless they are watered into the soil.

Gardeners often wonder what type of sprinkler is best. Generally speaking, most do a satisfactory job of making an even application. However the most efficient and effective type is the impact sprinkler (the kind used on golf courses and athletic fields).

These tips should get you started. There are other considerations. Some plants like drier conditions than others. When you plant them don't plant them near something that likes lots of water. Plants that use about the same amount of water should be planted together; this is true in containers or next to each other in a flower bed. Another consideration is our clay soil. When Dr. Welsh tells you to water deeply that means SLOWLY here in Bell County. Our clay soil does not readily absorb water. To get deeper penetration of water into soil you may need to do several applications.

Get to know your plants, and they will tell you when they need water.