

Water, But Water Wisely



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Microirrigation is an efficient way to water shrubs and flowers. It uses less water, putting the water only where it is needed.

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September 22, 2005

Is your lawn in need of watering? Actually, it may be in need of water right now unless we have received rain this week. It has been dry recently. But, too often people water when they don't need to.

The following are my personal opinions of proper watering practices, including frequency and amounts of water to apply. My opinions are based on personal experience of living in Tallahassee for over 50 years and a desire to protect an extremely valuable natural resource, our wonderful clean water. My recommendations apply to established plantings, not to new plantings which aren't established yet.

Lawns and shrubs are often watered incorrectly, both too frequently and too lightly. Watering too often may create a damp environment perfectly suited for fungal diseases, especially in lawns. It is better to water lawns and shrubs less frequently so that they develop deeper roots that enable them to better utilize soil water.

When you water, apply from three-quarters to one inch of water if your soil will accept it without the water running off the surface. The water should soak deeply, encouraging roots to grow down deep. If you water lightly, the water stays near the surface and roots do too, becoming very vulnerable during the next dry spell. If an oscillating sprinkler is used, it may take two hours to apply an inch of water.

Water

For established lawns I would suggest watering no more than once every two weeks. The general rule is to water only when the grass blades turn color to gray-green and visible footprints are left in the turf after you walk on it. As an example, I didn't have to water my lawn even once this spring or summer and it looked great! Of course, we did have ample rainfall until this fall. Only recently did we begin to see the gray-green color in the lawn.

During the recent four-year drought, I watered our lawn sporadically, only when it looked extremely thirsty. The last year of the drought I accidentally let 75% of the lawn die from lack of water. For a few months it was a total weed lawn. Did it matter? No, as soon as rains returned, the surviving pieces of St. Augustine grass spread quickly and by the end of the next summer, the lawn was solid and beautiful with few weeds. As an aside, I never used any weed killers. The chemical in most weed and feed type fertilizers is atrazine, an estrogen mimic that has affected the reproductive organs of frogs and may possibly cause human health problems as well.

My mother's lawn is the best example of lawn water needs. She has about an acre of centipede lawn. Only a small area close to the house is watered to keep it bright and green, and this only during very dry times. How often do the far reaches of her lawn get watered? Never! She has lived in the house for 44 years and the majority of the lawn has NEVER been watered! It is a healthy lawn.

Do you think you need an irrigation system? You probably know where I stand on the matter. If you already have a system, should it be set on automatic? My heart aches when I see sprinklers spewing water during a thunderstorm or even as recently as a week after a good rain. If you have an automatic system I hope you will only operate it manually and infrequently.

The next time you think your yard needs water, think of Mother Nature. Does she water her plants twice a week? Have plants survived over the past millions of years needing to be watered by humans twice a week? Did plants change twenty years ago and begin requiring irrigation systems to be installed with every new home and business? Tallahassee was a beautiful city through the fifties and sixties. In the heyday of Tallahassee garden clubs, lawns, azaleas, camellias, dogwoods and live oaks thrived and probably less than one percent of homes and businesses had automatic irrigation. There is nothing wrong with having an irrigation system. It certainly simplifies watering chores, but we need to use them wisely. You never know, South Floridians may say, "If North Florida can squander water on lawns, they can certainly afford to pipe water down to us!"

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