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Start Weaning Your Plants Now

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GARDEN NOTES

START WEANING YOUR PLANTS NOW

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Spring-36

Many people claim their plants die if not watered every day or two. This is only true if they have spoiled their plants by giving them everything they want.

“When a small section of lawn starts to look a little stressed, the owner goes right out to give those poor, delicate grass blades a big drink of cool water,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “How nice. Not smart, but nice.”

Depending on whose predictions you believe, this is going to be a dry summer, Goodspeed says. We may need to wean many of our plants off water or at least teach them to survive on less than they are used to getting. Most of the plants grown in our landscapes will do just fine this summer, if they are trained to grow deeper and stronger roots now.

Spring is the best time to train plants to develop deeper and stronger roots, he explains. The weather is cooler than it will be later, so plants grow and expand their root systems. Over-watering now makes water too available, reducing the need for the plant to develop a deep root system.

Consider the trees and shrubs in our foothills and canyons, Goodspeed says. They get a good, deep drink in the winter and spring. Throughout most of the summer, they must rely on their roots to pull moisture from deep under the ground. Many of these trees and shrubs also grow in soils that are mostly rock and gravel. These are water-holding conditions that are much worse than what is found in most of our landscapes.

Not only do these native trees and shrubs survive with limited water, but many wild flowers and native grasses exist under these same difficult circumstances, Goodspeed says. They even manage to live, bloom and grow in drought years. How do they do it? They develop extensive root systems that grow deep to find the water.

“I don’t expect our landscape plants to endure the same situation that native plants tolerate,” he says. “However, it demonstrates that our lawn and plants can be trained to endure dry years and water rations.”

How little water can your landscape get by on?

Figuring out the amount of water your sprinkler system is putting out is pretty simple,

Goodspeed says. Set five or more soup cans (or other straight-sided, large cans) randomly throughout the lawn. Turn the sprinklers on for 15 minutes. Then, use a ruler to measure the amount of water in each can. Add the amounts of water together, and divide that figure by the number of cans. This will give you an average.

If your average sprinkler output is 1/3 inch of water every 15 minutes, then it will take 45 minutes for your landscape to receive one inch, he says.

“With the example we just looked at, the lawn would need to be watered a total of 45 minutes per week (about one inch) from May into June,” he says. “During May, you could divide the watering into two times of about 23 minutes each, or one 45 minute session, depending on how deep the water penetrates the soil. If Mother Nature is so kind as to provide an inch of rain water one of those weeks, you can, of course, eliminate a watering session.”

During the hottest temperatures in the middle of the summer, a lawn only uses about 2 to 2 ½ inches of water per week, Goodspeed says.

As you start healthier watering practices and the lawn or other plants begin to look a little stressed, don't panic, he says. They will figure out how to grow deeper roots, and quickly adapt to water rationing. Another advantage is you won't have to tell them about the cutbacks in their water supply, because they won't even notice.

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