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GARDEN NOTES

REPROGRAM YOUR LAWN

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Though we may love the convenience of automated sprinkler systems, our love needs to be tempered with restraint. There is nothing more mind boggling than seeing sprinkler heads popping up during a rain storm.

Even if you already have your sprinkler system programed for the rest of the year, now is a good time to review proper watering practices, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

Plant roots have a number of different functions, he says, including absorbing nutrients, anchoring the plant and taking up water and oxygen. Absorbing oxygen is just as important as water. Without oxygen in the soil, most plants die. Too much water in the soil pushes the oxygen out and literally drowns the plants. It also increases root rot, iron chlorosis and other problems.

Roots are designed to grow deep into the soil in search of water and nutrients, Goodspeed says. Native plants, for example, can handle the majority of their water coming in the spring and receiving minimal surface water during the heat of summer.

The roots of our landscape plants can be trained to do the same, he explains. In fact, plants that are watered deeply and infrequently develop more extensive root systems, and are generally healthier. When plants are watered every day or two, they develop shallow roots and wilt quickly if they aren't watered regularly. This results in wimpy, spoiled plants. It is true that some soils maintain the moisture better than others. But, even in a sandy soil, plants can adjust to less frequent watering.

“Years ago, the only way we could water was to flood irrigate once a week,” Goodspeed says. “The plants (including grass) survived and even flourished.”

Training plants to a different watering schedule takes time and effort, but it saves water and creates healthier plants in the long run, he says. If you are currently watering every day, the first thing to do is start increasing the length of time between watering and extend the amount of time you water. Begin by watering a few minutes longer on the first day, then do not water the next day.

“The plants and lawn may seem a little stressed as they notice the change, but they want

to survive as much as you want them to," he says. "Close your eyes, stay away from the sprinkler box, and wait until the next day to water again. After a week or two of watering every second day, the plants will adapt and begin to flourish again."

Step three—go two days between watering, he suggests. Again, increase the watering time just a little, and on the third day, vacate the yard and leave town. As before, the landscape may be a little stressed, but that's its way of adapting as it searches for moisture. After a week or two, the plants will accommodate the change and look great again.

"See how many days your lawn and yard can go between watering," Goodspeed says. "It may sound evil to stress the poor plants, but eventually they will be better off. Watering less frequently not only saves water and creates healthier plants, but also prepares our landscapes for future droughts and water shortages. Better watering practices also helps reduce weeds and saves money for those who use culinary water for their landscape. Your family will also benefit from a drier lawn to play and lay on."

For more information, contact your local **USU County Extension office.**

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