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GARDEN NOTES

CONSERVE, BUT NO NEED TO “ZERO” SCAPE

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Spring - 58

There is no doubt about it, the water situation in Southern Utah this year is going to call for restraint and innovation. However, there is no need, as yet to convert your entire yard to rocks and cacti.

Lawns are often blamed for using the most water and yet there are ways to maintain nice green grass and still be prudent with water, says Rick Hefelbower, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Contrary to popular opinion, lawns do not need to be watered every day. As a matter of fact, watering deeply - but infrequently now - will help your lawn adjust when the temperatures skyrocket in another month or so.

With each watering, you should be applying about three-quarters of an inch, he says. You're really not doing much good if you apply less than a half an inch. The idea is to water the entire root zone for a depth of 5-6 inches and then let the soil dry out for several days before watering again. If you water too frequently now, you condition the lawn to require lots of water. When it really gets hot and the need is great, the roots will not be able to supply enough moisture to keep up with what is lost. This sets the lawn up for "stress" and predisposes it to insect or disease problems.

If you are doing landscaping, there are some things to consider, Hefelbower says. When putting in a sprinkler system, use bubblers or drip emitters whenever you can. Spray type sprinklers are the least efficient. With sprinklers, as much as 30 to 50 percent of the water may go off target. It will end up on the street, the sidewalk and some will simply evaporate before it hits the ground on days when humidity is low and it's breezy.

If you are building beds or starting from scratch, remember that the addition of organic matter is extremely valuable to our desert soils, he says. Organic matter will do much to improve texture and water-holding capacity. Mulch is important for water conservation and to help control weeds.

When deciding what plants to use, consider xeric (dry) plants, Hefelbower says. These are ones that typically require less water once established. This doesn't necessarily mean cactus - although there are many that do well here. Examples are: Texas Ranger, Autumn Sage, Bush Morning Glory and Arizona Rosewood.

If you really want to go dry, then consider some of the native plants, he suggests. Some

examples would be Penstemons, Desert Marigold, Apache Plum and Snake Weed. All of the plants mentioned are perennials, (which means they don't need to be replanted), and they all bloom! Local nurseries carry most of these and the number of xeric plants that are available has expanded considerably this season.

If you want to be sure to have some color all summer, establish a small bed of annual flowers. Hefelbower adds. Locate it close to the house or near a window where you can enjoy them. Lantanas and Verbenas can take full sun, but they will need to be watered fairly often to stay looking good. Annual flowers and vegetable plants will require the most water so put them where they will be easy to get to for watering and weeding.

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