

When Do I Water My Lawn?

We have endured a few weeks with almost no rain. This week, I observed wilting areas in my lawn. Once the hot part of the day sets in, dry spots in the grass will actually start going dormant. This is characterized by a silver color of the grass. We need to start thinking about watering our lawns at this time.

Apply water when signs of moisture stress (e.g., wilt) are observed on 30 to 50 percent of the lawn. For most turfgrass species, wilted turfgrasses will have a dull to bluish-green color, leaf blade folding or rolling, and footprints will remain visible for a minute or longer after walking over the area.

The key to managing our lawn's water requirements during periods of drought is to get the right amount of water down to the roots. We need about one inch of water on our lawns each week. Apply enough water to wet the soil 6 to 8 inches deep. This is usually equivalent to one inch of water or 600 gallons of water per 1,000 square feet.

If your soil is very sandy, we can split this one inch into two half inch waterings. If the soil is more loam or clay, it has a greater water holding capacity. For these soils, we can water once a week.

Last week, I noticed the amount of sprinklers running – which is absolutely needed. However, I could not help but notice the number of sprinklers and irrigation systems that were running during mid to late afternoon. This is not a good time to water our lawns.

Aside from increasing the period of leaf wetness and elevating disease potential, much of the water applied to our lawns during this time does not reach the roots. As the humidity lowers, evaporation increases. Water evaporates from the air and soil before it reaches the roots. To compensate, the amount of water has to be increased.

Instead of using more water and increasing utility bills, we should instead water between recommended times of 9 pm to 9 am. This timing lowers the occurrence of evaporation and decreases the length of time the turf is wet. This in turn minimizes disease severity.

It is also recommended to place some kind of cup or pan to collect water while the sprinkler is running. You will then be able to estimate how much water you apply.

During hot, dry periods, we need to apply a greater amount of water at each period rather than short, daily waterings. Light, frequent irrigations promote a shallow root system. Irrigation is only a supplement to rainfall. Therefore, in times of drought, roots are not deep enough to obtain water. Less frequent and heavy irrigations encourage deeper root growth. We need a very strong and deep root system to endure periods of heat and drought. This practice alone can be the difference in a lawn surviving a drought phase.

For additional questions, contact the Thomas County Extension office at 225-4130.