



UNIVERSITY OF
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EXTENSION

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Tips for Maintaining Landscapes During Drought¹

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Drought occurs in every part of Florida at one time or another, so you need to know how to conserve water while also maintaining your landscape. Increasingly, Florida is at greater risk of water shortages due to increased urbanization, population growth, and limited water supply. During a drought, the regional water management districts in Florida have the authority to restrict water use. With these limitations on water use, you must decide how best to maintain your landscape with the limited water available.

With a variety of plants, shrubs, trees, and lawn grass in your landscape, how can you determine when to water and how much water to apply during drought conditions? We've developed this fact sheet to help you. All plants require different amounts of water to survive, but there are some general guidelines you can follow for maintaining your landscape during drought.

The following tips will help you maintain your landscape during drought conditions and conserve water.

Follow your local and regional restrictions on water use. Water restrictions are designed to conserve water during drought conditions, while also meeting the minimum water needs of humans, agriculture, and industry. Florida's regional water management districts issue restrictions on water use, but local municipalities also may issue guidelines or restrictions.

Tips for Managing Your Landscape During Drought

Prioritize Your Landscape Water Needs

Water your highly visible and most intensively managed areas first. You might consider watering drought-sensitive plants first. If you must choose between watering landscape plants (including trees and shrubs) and watering your lawn then water your plants, trees and shrubs. Replacing

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lawn grass is usually less expensive than replacing trees and shrubs. Note: Plants in sandy soil and full sunlight are most susceptible to drought injury.

Best Time of Day to Water

Water early in the morning, when less water is lost to evaporation and wind drift. In early morning, the air is cooler and there is less wind.

How to Water

Water established plants deeply and less frequently. Deep watering improves drought resistance in established plants by promoting deeper and more extensive root systems. Newly installed plants need just the opposite: light frequent applications. Many new plants need daily water to thrive.

How Long Should I Run the Sprinkler?

To determine how long to run your sprinklers for deep watering of your lawn, place empty cans throughout the spray pattern of your sprinkler. Keep track of the amount of time it takes for 1 inch of water to accumulate in the cans. (Check all the cans because some areas of spray pattern may not receive as much water as other areas.)

Now you know how long to run the sprinkler to give your landscape a deep watering without wasting water. Keeping that amount of time in mind, read these general guidelines:

- In sandy soil, 1 inch of watering soaks soil to a depth of about 12 inches.
- For grass and bedding plants, apply 1/2 inch to 1 inch of watering (soaks soil to a *depth* of 6 to 12 inches).
- For perennials, shrubs and trees, apply 1 inch of water (soaks soil to *depth* of 12 inches).

Watering Frequency

Extend the number of days or weeks between water applications to the longest possible interval. Water lawns only after 30% of the lawn starts to wilt (grass blades curl when wilting). Water trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals after they start to wilt. Some trees do not wilt; they simply drop interior leaves in drought.

Mowing Frequency

Mow less frequently. Mowing stresses grass by increasing transpiration (water loss from leaves to atmosphere) and by reducing root growth.

Mowing Height

Raise the mowing height of your lawn mower. Maintaining your lawn grass at a taller height will help it develop deeper root systems, which in turn make the grass more tolerant of drought.

Lawn Mower Blades

Keep your lawn mower blades sharp. Sharp blades make cleaner cuts, and cleaner cuts cause less plant stress and less water loss from grass.

Controlling Weeds

Control all weeds. Weeds use water that would otherwise be available for desirable plants.

Mulch

Use 2 to 3 inches of mulch on entire beds of shrubs, trees, annuals and perennials. Mulch reduces evaporation from soil and moderates soil temperature, reducing stress on roots.

Fertilizing

Don't fertilize during drought--fertilizer promotes plant growth, which increases the need for water.

Conclusion

Periods of drought are natural in Florida but are nonetheless stressful for plants, animals, and people. Now you are prepared to care for your landscape during drought by using limited water wisely in your

landscape. For more in-depth information about caring for your landscape during drought, see other UF/IFAS publications on the Internet or contact your county extension agent.