

Preparing lawn for dry weather

May is usually a dry month. In Florida, it only takes a few rainless days for lawns to suffer drought injury. You'd be wise to follow practices that improve drought tolerance in your lawn.

In this week's article, I'll summarize proven practices from University of Florida turfgrass researchers that will help you develop a quality lawn which will survive on less water.

This process involves changes in commonly accepted practices. In addition to irrigation, mowing, fertilization, pest control and turf alternatives must be evaluated.

Correct irrigation is our first consideration. Numerous, light sprinklings produce shallow, weak root systems that need frequent watering. To develop deep, drought resistant root systems, lawns should be watered only when signs of wilt first appear – when the grass begins to turn bluish-gray, footprints remain for a longtime and when the blades begin to curl. When this occurs, apply enough water to wet the rootzone. About ½ to ¾ inch is sufficient. Measure how long it takes your irrigation system or sprinkler to apply ½ to ¾ inch of water. Place several straight-sided cans, such as soup or tuna fish cans, in the area to be watered to measure the amount of water applied. Do not water again until signs of wilt are seen again. Through this process, the lawn will gradually develop a strong, deep root system and a more uniform appearance.

Proper mowing is essential to prepare turf for drought. To maximize food production and root growth, make sure that you are not mowing too low. Cut often enough to minimize mowing shock, never taking off more than 1/3 the height of the grass at one time. Keep mower blades sharp and adjust mowing frequency to grass growth rate.

Use a drought conditioning fertilization program. Too much nitrogen stimulates excessive leaf production while reducing root growth, which is exactly the opposite of the desired traits for minimum water requirements. Potassium helps grasses increase their tolerance to stress by promoting root growth and development of thicker cell walls. As with water, your fertilization objective is to stimulate limited, healthy grass growth and a deep root system. Most people fertilize with too much nitrogen and too little potassium.

Excessive use of chemicals can cause lawn stress. Pesticides should be applied only at the first signs of damage and not on a preventative basis. Early spot treatments of limited areas are better than treating the entire lawn.

Finally, you might turn to water-saving grass substitutes such as appropriate groundcover plants or mulched areas where practical. And use grass where it is needed or where it serves a purpose in your landscape. "Wall to wall" grass may not be necessary or desirable.

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