

## **Water efficient landscape by design**

As much as sixty percent of all household water use during summer months is used outdoors. Unfortunately, much of this water is wasted by people who don't know how and when to water.

An efficient water use design includes dividing the landscape into three water-use zones: low, medium and high.

Low water-use zones require little to no supplemental water after establishment. Moderate water-use zones contain plants that require some supplemental irrigation during hot, dry periods. High water-use zones should be limited in the landscape to small high-impact or most visible areas of the home such as the entrance.

Shade helps cool the landscape by as much as twenty degrees and reduces water loss. It is an important design concept.

Use practical lawn areas. Locate lawngrass where it provides the most functional benefit such as recreational areas or on slopes to prevent erosion. Separate the lawn from ornamental plants in the landscape so they can be watered separately. Most lawngrasses can be located in any of the three water-use zones but the amount and frequency of irrigation should be adjusted accordingly.

Only water plants that need to be watered. An irrigation system is a tool to supplement rainfall, not to water in addition to rainfall. Daily watering is bad for plants. It encourages shallow root systems and causes plants to demand more water. Water your lawn and landscape on an as-needed basis.

Midday watering of turf areas is not recommended because much of the applied water can be lost due to evaporation and wind blowing the water off site. Water between 9:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. to minimize evaporation and foliar diseases.

Consider use of micro-irrigation in plant bed, vegetable garden and fruit garden areas. Micro-irrigation uses less water and is more efficient than traditional irrigation systems.

Mulch is vital to a water-efficient landscape. Mulch helps conserve soil moisture and keeps the root area cooler during hot, dry weather. A two to three inch layer of organic mulch such as pine straw, pine bark or woodchips helps create a more water efficient landscape.

Try to match the right plant for the site conditions and preserve as many native plants as possible. Native plants are generally well adapted to the environment and may require no supplemental irrigation.

During dry weather, mow the lawn so that no more than 1/3 of the leaf tissue is removed at each mowing. This reduces plant stress and water demand. Reduce fertilization during dry weather because it can damage plant roots in dry soils.

For additional water saving ideas, contact your local University of Florida County Extension Office.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, June 20, 2009