

Plant clinic and proper management helps during drought

Many of our lawn, landscape and garden problems occurring now are caused by the dry weather we are experiencing. The month of May is usually a dry month.

Before treating these problems with a pesticide, have samples checked at plant clinic and adjust irrigation, fertilization, mowing height and mulching during dry weather.

A plant clinic to assist in diagnosing lawn, landscape and garden problems will be held Thursday, May 19, 10 a.m. – 1 p.m. in Fort Walton Beach at the Okaloosa County Extension building, 127 W. Hollywood Blvd. To participate, bring a sample of the weed, plant, insect, etc., to the clinic. Bring a fresh sample that represents what is seen in the landscape. This may include a plant stem with several leaves, a 4-inch square of grass with roots attached, etc. You may also bring a sample of your soil for pH testing.

During dry periods, set priorities. Water highly visible and intensively managed areas first. Drought-sensitive plants should have high priority and grass should have lower priority.

Watering early (between 2 a.m. and 8 a.m.) while it is cooler and less windy results in less water loss from evaporation and wind drift.

On established plantings, irrigate deeply at long intervals rather than watering frequently and shallowly. Deep watering improves drought resistance by promoting deeper, more extensive root systems. Depth of watering should be six to twelve inches. One inch of irrigation wets a sandy soil to a depth of about twelve inches.

Examine your irrigation system and repair leaks promptly. Make sure the water lands on your plants and grass and not on paved areas.

Make the most out of rainwater. Turn downspouts from rain gutters towards areas with plantings. Rainwater can also be collected and stored in a rain barrel for dry spells.

Avoid excessive fertilization. Don't fertilize or, if you do, use a low nitrogen fertilizer. Fertilization stimulates growth and increases water needs.

Raise the cutting height of turf. Although taller grass uses slightly more water than shorter grass, a higher cutting height promotes deeper rooting and maintains turf quality longer.

Add mulch to beds to reduce evaporation from soil and to moderate soil temperature, reducing stress on roots. Final depth of mulch should be three to four inches after settling.

If possible, don't use overhead sprinklers for shrub and flowerbeds. Hand water, flood irrigate or use trickle irrigation. Greater water loss can occur with overhead irrigation because of evaporation and wind drift.

Handouts on dealing with drought will be available at the plant clinic on May 19.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, May 12, 2011