Water management during dry weather

So far our spring has been unusually dry and May is usually a dry month. Even though our average annual rainfall is around sixty-two inches per year, we don’t always receive rain exactly when we need it. There are times when we need to apply additional water. During dry weather, implement the following water management practices to improve your landscapes water efficiency.

Mulching helps conserve water. On bare ground about sixty percent of the water can be lost through evaporation. A two to three inch layer of mulch will help hold onto the water so the plants can use it. Try to mulch the entire root zone by applying mulch all the way around the plants out to the end of the branches.

When watering, a thorough soaking to wet the soil to a depth of six to eight inches is much better for plants than light frequent watering. Three to five gallons of water applied to one spot under the canopy of trees or shrubs should thoroughly saturate the root zone in that location. During dry periods (as a general rule), twenty-five percent of the root system, when watered thoroughly, can absorb all the water a plant requires at any given time.

In watering turfgrass, apply one to two inches of water per week when we are not getting rain. Although most sprinklers have irrigation rates of ¼ inch per hour, some may apply up to one inch per hour. Measure your irrigation rate and uniformity by placing several open-top containers of the same size under the sprinkler and see how long it takes to apply a known amount of water such as ½ inch.

And efficient irrigation program on turf should not begin until the lawnggrass shows signs of moisture stress. Symptoms include a dull and bluish-green color and leaf blades folding. The most efficient time to irrigate is between sunset and sunrise because of less evaporation, less wind and lower temperatures. Early morning is the next most effective time to irrigate while midday is the least efficient.

Avoid fertilizing drought-stressed plants. Fertilizers are chemical salts and will actually dehydrate roots when water is in short supply. If you need to apply a pesticide, make certain the plant is not wilted at the time and spray during early morning or late afternoon. You should also avoid unnecessary pruning of plants during drought. Pruning encourages new growth which has a high demand for water.

For more information on watering efficiently and drought tolerant plants, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Office or visit the following web sites. http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu, http://hort.ufl.edu/FYN

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