Most gardeners don’t like wet feet, and neither do plants

Recent tropical storms have produced a lot of rain for much of Florida and the Gulf Coast. Frequent and intense rain can cause excessively wet soil. When combined with high temperatures and humidity, saturated soil conditions can create stressful and potentially destructive conditions for bedding plants, perennials, vegetables, shrubs and even trees.

When the soil is saturated from rain or flooding, pore spaces in the soil that normally hold air are filled with water. Since the roots of plants get the oxygen they need from the air in those spaces, the roots can literally drown when soils stay waterlogged for an extended period. A sick root system leads to a sick plant. Plants in this situation often lose vigor, look wilted, yellow, stunted or may even die.

Wet conditions also encourage fungus organisms in the soil to attack the roots or crown of a plant and cause rot. These disease organisms can cause dieback, severe damage or even kill plants. Once infection occurs, little can be done to help a plant. Plants with succulent stems (such as impatiens and begonias), those that like cooler temperatures (such as geraniums and dianthus) and those that prefer drier, well-drained soils (such as Indian hawthorns) are particularly susceptible.

Gardeners can help alleviate wet soil conditions. For one thing, adjust your irrigation systems that are on an automatic timer. It’s not unusual to see sprinklers unnecessarily watering at homes or businesses the day after a heavy rain simply because the timer turned them on. Turn off the automatic timer if the weather is wet, and turn the system on only when drier conditions occur. Better yet, be sure your irrigation system has a functioning rain sensor.

Shrubs and other plants affected by wet soils or root rot may look wilted even though the soil is moist. Leaf edges or entire branches may turn brown, and a bush may yellow and drop leaves. Shrubs showing these...
symptoms may ultimately be lost, but soil aeration in the root zone could help in some cases. Using a garden fork, drive the tines straight down into the soil about 8 inches and pull straight out in numerous places around the shrubs. Do not dig with the fork, but make as many holes as seems practical. This technique provides air to the roots and encourages the soil to dry faster.

Fungus diseases that attack the foliage of many plants, such as black spot on roses and cercospora leaf spot on crape myrtles, are encouraged by rainy weather. Lawn diseases, such as gray leaf spot, thrive in wet weather and are bound to be far more active as a result of rainy periods. Leaf spots and fruit rots are also likely to be more prevalent in vegetable gardens.

As the weather dries, a preventive application of a broad spectrum fungicide may be helpful on lawns, ornamentals and vegetables to prevent problems with leaf spots and fruit rots. Contact your local extension office for current recommendations.

Other pests such as snails and slugs thrive and reproduce rapidly during rainy weather. These pests chew holes in the leaves and flowers of plants, and they are particularly fond of soft-leaved plants such as impatiens, begonias and hostas. Try not to let their populations get out of control. If you have toads in your garden, that's great because they feed on slugs.

If floodwaters have covered any part of your landscape, here are a few tips. Do not consume any vegetables that have been touched by the floodwater. There may be contaminants in the water. Once the floodwaters recede, promptly remove any debris or sediments covering the lawn. Hose off low-growing shrubs and bedding plants that may have been covered by floodwaters.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.
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