Summer Watering Tips

Soon we will be in the midst of a hot Florida summer. This can be a particularly stressful time for plants, especially if they are not watered properly. Proper watering during hot weather can be confusing and is probably one of the most misunderstood and poorly done gardening chores.

Water is necessary for plant health and growth. How much water a plant needs is dictated by many variables including several environmental factors. Temperature, relative humidity and wind all affect how much a plant transpires (water loss through leaves) and thus how much water the plant must take up from the soil.

Here are several tips for easier and more effective watering. These suggestions pertain to established plants. Newly planted lawns, trees, flowers and shrubs have slightly different watering needs.

Never water strictly by the calendar. We don’t drink water on a scheduled basis so why would we water our plants on a scheduled basis? Since a plant’s water needs are influenced by the weather, the optimal way to water is to look at your plant and learn to recognize when your plant needs water.

Lawns should be irrigated when approximately 50% of the grass shows drought signs. Signs include the leaf blades folding in half lengthwise, the grass taking on a blue-gray tint and footprints remaining visible on the grass long after being made.

When you do water, water thoroughly and deeply. Light, frequent waterings on established lawns is inefficient and encourages a shallow, weak root system. If you have the typical Florida sandy soil, we know that ¾ of an inch of water will wet the top 8-12 inches of the soil. Since most grass roots are in this zone, apply ½ to ¾ of an inch of water every time you water. This means that calibrating your sprinkler system is important. For information on how to perform a calibration, call your local Extension Office or view a UF/IFAS online document at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/LH026.

The best time to water is in the early morning. Watering during the day wastes water
due to evaporation. And, water on plants when temperatures are high or the sun is out can scald the leaves. Watering in late afternoon increases the likelihood of disease problems. Fungus diseases develop most rapidly in cool, moist conditions.

Just because a plant is wilted, don’t assume it’s due to lack of water. It may be due to too much water or poorly drained soil. Plants that are overwatered have the same symptoms as those that have been kept too dry, they wilt and turn yellow.

In flower and shrub beds, a good layer of mulch (2 to 3 inches after settling) can prevent the evaporative loss of water from the soil and increases the absorption and movement of water into the soil.

Newly planted grass, flowers, shrubs and trees have very different water needs than established plants. Keep newly planted trees and shrubs well watered. Water trees and shrubs with a slow drip or soaker hose. For more information on how to water a newly planted tree, visit a UF/IFAS tree website at http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/planting/.

For plants to thrive during the summer months, watering is necessary. While it may seem to be a relatively simple task, knowing when to water and how much to water are the keys to a successful garden and landscape.

Theresa Friday is the Extension Faculty in Environmental Horticulture for Santa Rosa County.

Extension Service programs are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap or national origin.