



How to Save Water and Keep Your Trees Healthy!

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

Besides their beauty, trees provide shade, cooling, privacy and oxygen. Even when water is in short supply, taking care of your trees should be a high priority.

Here are some ways you can keep your landscape trees healthy and reduce water:

- Water trees separately from surrounding plants. Trees prefer fewer, deeper watering than do lawns. A garden hose, mini- or micro-sprinkler, deep-root irrigator, and drip emitters all work well.
- Water your trees to a depth of two to three feet to help promote a deep root system. To check how deep the water is going, push a metal rod (such as a screwdriver), soil probe, or straightened coat hanger into the soil a day or so AFTER watering. It will move easily through moist soil, but become hard to push as the soil becomes drier, deeper down.
- Keep turfgrass and other plants at least one foot from tree trunks. This promotes faster tree growth and reduces competition for water. Also you will avoid tree damage from string trimmers and lawn mowers.
- Apply mulch around trees, keeping it a few inches away from tree trunks. Mulch reduces water evaporation from soil, buffers soil temperatures, and reduces weeds. Mulches should be applied in late spring, when soils are warm. Since mulches work by preventing sunlight from reaching the soil, dark products work the best. You need to add 2 to 6 inches of mulch (depending on the material) for an effective barrier. Remember to water through the mulch and into the root area. Drip systems are very useful in mulched planting since they apply water directly into the root zone.
- Control weeds around trees. They compete for water and nutrients and can harbor insects and diseases.
- Avoid soil compaction around trees. Compaction restricts water movement into the soil and decreases the oxygen necessary for plant growth. Construction activities should be kept several feet from tree trunks.
- Do not routinely fertilize landscape trees. Too much fertilizer (especially nitrogen) causes new growth flushes, requiring additional water. Many trees can live well for several years without fertilization.
- Prune trees only when necessary. Remove dead and diseased wood, dangerous branches, and suckers growing from the base of the tree. Pruning stimulates shoot growth and that increases the need for water.

When there just isn't enough water to apply the optimum amount to your landscape plants, most plants can survive on less, at least for one season. The key to survival is applying the water at the right time. To keep landscape trees alive, one or two thorough waterings in early spring and summer may be enough for the entire season. Remember not to apply water too quickly to sandy soils, because the water can move below the root zone quickly. Apply water slowly to clay soils so that water penetrates rather than rolls off the surface. Clay soils hold onto more water than sandier ones.

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