Sustainable Lawn Care

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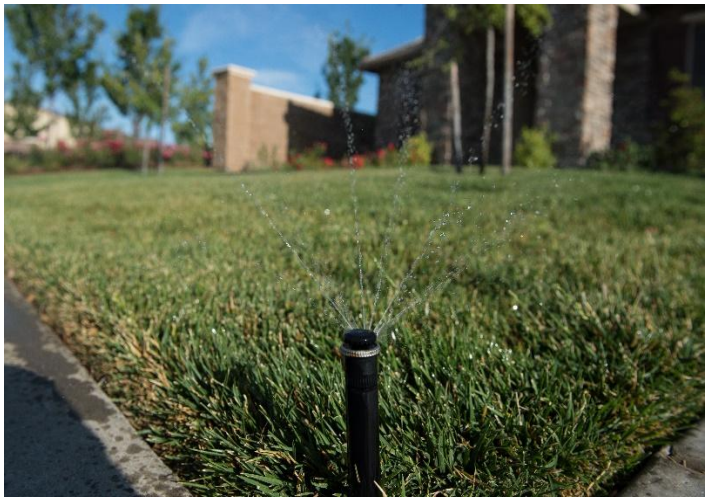
As UCCE Master Gardeners, we encourage homeowners to explore water-wise and habitat friendly landscaping options. Lawns fall short on both those fronts, requiring lots of water and providing little if any benefit to wildlife and pollinators. In these times of drought, those of us who have lawns, whether by circumstance or desire, may feel we're targets of shame. Don't despair! Read on to learn ways you can care for your lawn in ways that use fewer resources and are kinder to the environment.

Irrigation

Lawns require regular irrigation through our long, hot summers. But many people water too much and in the wrong way, wasting precious water. Unfortunately, much of the water applied to lav doesn't get where it needs to be, running into the gutter, getting carried away by the wind, or evaporating from the surface before reaching the roots. All these problems can easily be addressed. One of the most important things you can do to be a responsible lawn owner is to make sure you are watering as efficiently as possible.



Water less often but more deeply to encourage longer roots. Allow the top 2" of soil to dry out between waterings. This will not only save water, but also reduce weed growth, disease, and soil compaction. If you notice water running off or puddling, you can cycle irrigation times and/or aerate to increase penetration. The best time to water is between 2:00 and 8:00 am for best water distribution, to reduce evaporation and prevent disease.

New technologies in sprinklers and irrigation controllers can help water more efficiently. Replacing old spray sprinkler heads with new rotating sprinklers is a relatively easy and inexpensive way to retrofit your existing irrigation system and reduce the amount of water you use.

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They deliver water in larger droplets, provide more even coverage, and apply water more slowly, allowing it to soak in. Replace all the sprinklers on a given valve and make sure they have matched precipitation rates.

Obviously, lawns need watered more often when it is hot and dry and less when it is cool and damp, but many people forget to adjust their irrigation system to address this. If you have an older sprinkler controller, you should manually turn off your system in the rainy season and adjust the interval between watering days at least monthly during the rest of the year. To make it easier on yourself, consider getting a "smart" irrigation controller that will automatically adjust days and run times based on the season, weather conditions and even watering day restrictions. Another, less expensive way to avoid running your system unnecessarily is to add a rain sensor to your existing controller. Be sure to place the sensor in an exposed open space to accurately measure rainfall. Check with your water company to see what rebates they might offer to offset the cost of smart controllers and other irrigation system upgrades.

When you start irrigating in the spring and periodically throughout the season, run your irrigation system to check for leaks, and double check that your sprinklers are working properly and are aimed in the right direction.

Fertilizing

To look green and lush, your lawn needs a steady supply of nitrogen, which is available in multiple forms. Though they are less expensive, it's best to avoid fast-response, highly soluble nitrogen fertilizer products which can easily burn areas of the lawn, cause excessive growth that leads to thatch build up, and have a high potential to run off and pollute our waterways. Coated slow-release products and organic fertilizers such as those made from treated biosolids are a more eco-friendly choice. Releasing small amounts of nutrients over a longer time, they are less likely to cause fertilizer burn or to harm the environment. An added bonus is you won't have to fertilize as often. Whichever product you choose, it is important to read and follow the instructions carefully. Download Practical Lawn Fertilization for much more detail about the why, when, what and how of fertilizing.

Mowing and Grasscycling

Lawns should be mowed regularly during their active growing season, which will vary depending on the type of grass. This webpage can help you identify your turf grass species and lead you to more specific maintenance instructions. Cool season grasses, such as ryegrass, bluegrass and tall fescue, will need to be mowed more often in the spring and fall; warm-season grasses such as Bermuda, zoysia and kikuyu grow more in the summer and go dormant in the winter. The proper mowing height also depends on the species of grass you have. Make sure your mower blades are sharp and remove only 1/3 of the leaf blade height at a time. Don't mow if the grass is wet.

Grasscycling, in which clippings are left on the lawn during mowing, is an easy way to reduce the amount of fertilizer needed. The cut blades will slowly decompose in place, moderating soil temperature, reducing evaporation, and returning nutrients to the soil. To be most successful with grasscycling, the cut pieces should be small, so either use a mulching lawnmower or be sure to mow weekly or more often during the growing season. Click here for more information about mowing, grasscycling, and recommended heights for specific grass types.

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Weeds and Other Pests

Many people keep a lawn as a play area for children and pets, so it doesn't make sense to douse this area with poisonous pesticides. Proper irrigation and maintenance practices, as outlined above, will reduce insect, disease and fungal problems, and the UC IPM lawn pest page will give you least toxic methods for dealing with any that do occur. Tolerance for a less than picture perfect lawn can help save you the expense and trouble of trying to eradicate weeds. Keep in mind that dandelions, clover and other flowers that pop up in your turf provide food for bees and other pollinators. However, if weeds begin to take over, check out the Weed management in Lawns page.

Drought Conditions

As we face possible watering restrictions due to our drought conditions, remember that most turf grass lawns can survive with very little water by going into a state of dormancy and then will revive when the rains return in the fall and winter. Do, however, give extra care to any trees growing in lawns by giving a deep watering with a soaker hose or dripline every couple of weeks during the summer. If the only time you step on your lawn is to mow or care for it, you really should consider replacing it with one of the many beautiful water-wise alternatives. But if it is a well-loved and useful part of your landscape, take care of your lawn in a sustainable way so you can enjoy it guilt free.

References

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