

How To Get Your Stressed Trees Through The Hot And Dry Days

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, June 21, 2019

Q: This past week the trees on the edge of my yard started looking a bit droopy and some of the lower leaves are yellowing and dropping off. Should I be fertilizing them? I planted them a couple years ago and they have been doing well up until this past couple weeks.

A: Without further information I cannot be completely sure of your problem, but it sounds like water stress. Are the trees getting regular water? If so, have you checked recently to make sure the system is working properly? And are the trees getting water in addition to what the lawn is getting? Trees need a deeper watering than most lawns receive.

After our wet winter, it does not seem possible that we would be talking about water stress, but as the days get hotter, soils are drying out rapidly. Additionally, as your trees grow larger, they also need more water to stay hydrated. Keep in mind that soils dry out even faster during hot and windy conditions like we had earlier this month and you may need to increase watering accordingly. The first signs of water stress in landscape plants and trees include wilted or drooping leaves that do not return to normal (without additional water) by morning, curled or yellow leaves that may fold or drop, leaves that become grayish or bluish, sunburned leaves and new leaves that are smaller than normal.

For lawns, they may change to a bluish gray color rather than a vibrant green and have wilted blades of grass. As things dry out further, grass may turn yellow and then eventually brown. Another quick check to see if the lawn is water stressed is to check to see if the lawn grasses retain a footprint for several minutes. If it does, the grass needs more water and if the lawn does not receive adequate water, it may gradually turn brown and go dormant.

In regards to fertilizing plants to help them recover, it is best to resist the temptation. Although many gardeners think of fertilizer as a little pick-me-up for plants, fertilizers stimulate leaf production and increase the need for more water, causing even more stress to the plant. If you do fertilize, choose a low-nitrogen, slow-release fertilizer and use at the lowest recommended rate.

If there is no way you could be under-watering your trees, then perhaps you are over-watering them. This can be just as stressful to the tree and has similar symptoms to under-watering.

“Signs of overwatering, aside from obvious puddles and run-off, include leaves becoming yellow and dropping, and lawns that feel spongy or are turning yellow. Overwatering causes water logging (sometimes referred to as aeration deficit), which causes decay of feeder roots due to a lack of oxygen. Plants, trees and lawns may appear drought-stricken because the uptake of oxygen and nutrients is severely limited,” says Susan Burnside UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County.

There is an easy test to check if you are over-watering plants, just before you plan to water again use a soil probe or shovel to check the soil moisture near trees to at least 12 inches of depth. If the soil is still moist enough to leave a film of moisture on your hand when squeezed, then you may be watering too much.

You can find additional information for managing water stress in the UC publication “Keeping Plants Alive under Drought or Water Restrictions.” It is free to download at <http://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8553.pdf>.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.