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Watering Lawns in Drought

Having a lush green lawn this summer will be difficult, given water use restrictions and lack of water in home wells. The best course of action might be to take out your lawn and replace it with drought tolerant landscaping. However, if you do choose to keep a lawn, there are a few things to do to make the limited water you have more efficient.

Determine what type of grass you have. Warm season grasses turn brown in the winter and cool season grasses stay green all winter. Warm-season lawns planted in Bermuda grass and buffalo grass are more drought-efficient than cool season grasses, e.g. tall fescue and ryegrass. UC Riverside recommends that cool season grasses need a minimum 0.5 inches of water every 3 to 5 days and warm season grasses need minimum of 0.75 inches every 7 to 10 days to stay alive.

Check sprinkler irrigation systems regularly for physical and operational problems that reduce the sprinkler system's efficiency. Walk through an area while the irrigation system is running and repair or replace sprinklers that are broken, sunken, crooked, or clogged with soil or debris. Also, be certain that plants are not blocking or interfering with a sprinkler's spray pattern and that all emitters are of the same manufacture.

Increase runtimes and extend the number of days between irrigation events rather than reduce the runtime and keeping the same frequent irrigation interval. To do this successfully, schedule slightly longer irrigation runtimes so that the entire root zones of plants are rewetted at each irrigation and gradually increase the interval between irrigations over a few to several weeks. This practice will save water in the end and allow plants to adjust. Water between 12:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. In order to fully wet the soil to these depths without creating runoff or puddling of water will usually require scheduling two to four relatively short irrigation cycles of 5 to 15 minutes or so on each irrigation day, depending on slope, soil type, output of the irrigation system, and how much water is needed. Be certain the irrigation water is applied uniformly.

If you stop watering a lawn, it will gradually turn brown, signifying it has died or become dormant. Depending on weather conditions, this may take from 1 to 6 weeks for most lawn grasses, but it might take longer for deep-rooted grasses like Bermuda grass. The first signs of inadequate water will be wilting of grass blades and a bluish-gray appearance. Next, leaf blades will yellow and eventually become brown. The lawn will probably not turn from a uniform green to a uniform brown, but will instead look mottled with green, yellow-green, gray, and brown areas. A lawn that recently turned brown from drought can often be revived with regular, thorough watering. Warm season grasses and may come back after several weeks of dryness. Cool season grasses may die within a month or two of receiving no water.

For more information, contact the UC Master Gardener's Plant Clinic on Wednesday afternoon from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. in the UC Cooperative Extension Office in Orland or phone 530-865-1107.

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