Watering Tips from RCW Nurseries, Inc.

How will your lawn, trees, shrubs and flower beds survive this year's drought? It will be challenging because an automatic sprinkler system alone will not do the job. You will need to fine-tune your watering system, making sure any and all water is delivered where it's needed and to minimize its evaporation. By following our recommendations, your shrubs, trees and garden beds should pull through.

Shrubs and Trees

They are your highest watering priority.

They must receive deep watering, that cannot be provided by your automatic sprinkler system. So invest in both a watering timer (manual or digital) and a soaker hose. Water seeps out of these porous rubber hoses right to your plants' roots where it's needed. The effective maximum length for a soaker hose is 100 feet. Purchase the length that best fits your planted areas and use it only in those areas, winding it between your shrubs and trees. Attach the timer to the garden faucet. Finally, use a garden hose to connect the soaker hose to the faucet.

Turn the faucet on just enough so the entire hose is seeping but not spraying. The amount may vary for every faucet. Let the water soak 6- to 8-inches down into the soil each time you water. Figure out how long you need to keep your hose on by watering for 30 minutes and then checking how far down the water has seeped. Check by poking the entire length blade length of a sturdy 5/16 x 8-inch screwdriver into the ground. If it does not go in easily, then water for an additional 30 minutes, and test again. When you find the magic number for your conditions, program the timer to water the same number of minutes every time.

After this initial watering, cover the hose with mulch – it does double duty by disguising the hose and helping your soil retain moisture longer. Apply the mulch, spreading it to a point midway between the shrubs' dripline and trunk/main stems. Then manually water the mulch with your garden hose, wetting it thoroughly. You want to "knit" the mulch into the soil.

Make sure to test and adjust your watering time as the warm season wears on, or when significant amount of rain is received.

If your faucet is located far from your garden bed, first install the soaker hose in the garden and then connect the soaker hose to the faucet with a solid garden hose.

Watering trees presents its own set of challenges, depending where they are sited. Their roots (including the tap root) are within the top 18 to 24 inches of soil, and extend outward to the edges of the tree's canopy. If a tree is located in garden beds, then you can wind the soaker hose around them.

If they are established, mature (older than 3-years) and located further way, they should be watered using your garden hose. Place the hose at a spot in between the trunk and the edge of the canopy. Water the area slowly, and deeply, to avoid run off. Move the hose from one spot to another, going around the tree until it is watered. Trees in these locations should be watered in this fashion once per month.

If the tree has been planted within the past 3 years, it needs to be deeply watered once per week. You can use the garden hose to water it, as described above. Alternatively, you can surround the trunk with a Treegator. A Treegator is a slow release watering bag that will water the tree over a 5 – 9 hour period.

Garden Beds

Your next priority is your garden bed: perennials and annuals. A soaker hose is very effective with meeting their watering needs. Mulch, mulch, mulch. It keeps the ground cooler and prevents water in the soil from quickly evaporating. When planting new color, water them and the surrounding soil thoroughly before applying mulch. Do not depend on your automatic sprinkler system to do the job. It's best to hand water and soak the soil thoroughly. Apply the mulch, spreading it to a point midway between the plants' dripline and trunk/main stems. Then repeat the manual watering, wetting the mulch thoroughly.

The Lawn

This is your last watering priority. Automatic sprinklers work best on lawns, but during a drought it cannot keep your lawn green. Grass will always dormant in the dry conditions, concentrating on keeping its roots alive. Your goal has to be the same. Thus lawns should be watered as infrequently as possible.

St. Augustine needs ¾ to 1 inch of water a week to stay green, Bermuda grass needs ½ inch a week. Water however long is necessary to get the ground wet to a depth of approximately 6 inches. To measure how much your sprinkler waters in a set amount of time, place 3 to 5 empty tuna or pet food cans in a line that starts near the sprinkler head and continues to the edge of the sprinkler's coverage. Run the system for 10 minutes, then measure the amount in the cans. Determine how much longer you'll need to water to apply an inch. If you need proof you've done the job, use a sturdy 5/16 x 8-inch screwdriver and poke the entire length of the screwdriver into the ground. If it goes in easily, then the sprinkler has done its job.

Should watering times and days become restricted, divide the sprinkling time by the number of days per week that your subdivision allows you to water. If you are allowed to water the lawn 3 days per week, and it takes your system an hour to apply 1-inch of water, set the timer to run for 20-minutes on your allotted watering days.

If you are allowed to water only 2 days a week, then set the timer to run the sprinkler for 30 minutes in 2 cycles on those days. The first watering will be15 minutes, followed by a half-hour wait, then another 15 minute watering.

This advice applies if you are only allowed to water 1 day a week. Set the timer to run the sprinkler for 15 minutes in 4 cycles (or 20 minutes in 3 cycles), separated by a half hour between cycles.

This brings up a general rule of thumb: Never irrigate more than 20 minutes per cycle and wait 30 minutes per cycle. The reason is that soil can only absorb so much moisture in a short duration, and the water needs a chance to percolate down. If you irrigate longer, you'll find most of the water runs off into storm drains.

Do not fertilize with conventional lawn fertilizer, it just promotes thirsty growth. Organic fertilizer encourages healthy soil, which takes longer to dry out.

Mow your lawn high -- St. Augustine grass at 3 inches, Bermuda grass at 1-1/2 inches. Longer grass survives drought much better, shading the soil and conserving moisture. Leave the clippings on the lawn. They'll break down within a day or 2, feeding the soil. An organically enriched soil holds moisture better.

The Sprinkler System

Check it weekly. Scout out and repair drips, leaks and cracks. Make sure the rotor heads are not impeded by the taller grass, sending water to the sidewalk or street.

Plant Drought-Tolerant Plants

Even with the most drought-tolerant varieties, you just can't "plant it and forget it". It takes time for any plant to develop enough of a root system to gather sufficient water from rainfall, so water them regularly until they are well established.

When first planting perennials and shrubs, you will probably have to water them each day for a week, in order to get the roots knitted into the soil. For the remainder of the warm season, assuming this drought continues, you may need to water them ever other, or third day.

And even if they are mature and well-established, they still need to be watered. Drought-tolerant means that they survive dry conditions better between waterings.

Vacations

The classic dilemma. The best thing to have for the garden’s survival while you vacation is a good friend or neighbor. Providing them with written instructions is a must. They should know how to turn the soaker hose, and/or sprinkler system on and off, and adjust watering if significant rain falls while you are away (one can only hope).