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Watering Practices for Established Lawns

Watering a mature lawn is different from watering new sod. Many lawns suffer due to improper watering schedules or techniques. Proper watering should focus on conserving water while maximizing long-term plant health.

WHEN TO WATER YOUR LAWN

As a general rule, your lawn should be watered **when it needs water**. In our local climate, we often have rainy periods in which no supplemental irrigation is needed. You should only need to water when we have extended dry weather. Many people wrongly set sprinklers to water “every day” or “every other day”. Generally, deep, infrequent watering results in healthier roots and therefore healthier turf.

Learn to recognize the signs of dry turf. When turf begins to dry, the leaves will curl and have a needle-like appearance. Dry spots will have a purple or grey color. Also, a lawn in need of water shows footprints for over 1/2 hour, while footprints disappear within a few minutes on a well-watered lawn.

When signs of dry turf begin to appear, it is time to water your lawn. Water deeply to achieve soil saturation down to 4-6 inches. Depending on soil and slope, you may notice water run off before the soil is completely saturated. To conserve water, turn off the water when runoff begins, wait 30 minutes to an hour and restart the watering on the same area, repeating as needed. It may take up to 24 hours, with several “on and off” cycles to reach soil saturation. However, this is very important for effective watering.

Note: Be careful to begin watering before drought stress becomes severe. If turf becomes severely wilted, it may end up requiring more water to bring it back to a healthy state.

When possible, **water early in the morning** to take advantage of the daily start of the grass's normal growing cycle, usually lower wind speeds, and less loss of water by evaporation.

HOW TO WATER YOUR LAWN

Proper watering techniques are an important aspect of water conservation. Water is a limited resource that costs money. Often, water is overused, which results in the misguided perception that turfgrass wastes water.

Avoid hand sprinkling because it cannot provide the necessary uniformity. Most people do not have the patience, time, or "eye" to adequately measure what is being applied across any large areas of lawn. Note: Hand watering can be used during initial installation of sod until a large enough area is installed to set up a sprinkler.

In-Ground sprinkler systems are an excellent tool for even, efficient water distribution. We recommend them whenever possible, because they give you the ability to water your entire lawn with the touch of button. The ability to accurately control your water makes proper watering techniques much easier.

However, the greatest mistake made with most in-ground systems is the "set it and forget it" philosophy, which fails to account for changes in weather and seasonal water requirements. While modern "smart controllers" can be a good step towards conserving water, we recommend that you avoid using your timer to schedule watering. Rather, follow the practice of recognizing dry turf, then watering deeply when needed. If you are leaving town, check the weather forecast and use your timer to schedule deep watering days at proper intervals.

Another problem is when sprinklers get out of alignment and apply water to the sidewalk, street, or house rather than to the lawn. Be sure that your sprinklers are properly installed and adjusted.

Hose-End Sprinklers range in complexity, cost, and durability, but are highly portable and can provide uniform and consistent coverage, when properly placed on the yard. If using hose-end sprinklers, be sure to achieve full coverage with minimal water loss

Sprinklers that do not throw water high into the air are generally more efficient, as are larger drop generators, because they will not be affected as much by wind and evaporation. Plus, trees and shrubs will not block the pattern.

HOW MUCH WATER DOES YOUR LAWN NEED?

A general recommendation is that lawns need **one inch of water per week**, by either natural rainfall or irrigation. However, this varies greatly depending on grass type, time of year, and soil conditions. More water is required in hot, dry, and windy conditions when evaporation rates are high. In the spring and fall, evaporation is generally less and your lawn may be okay with less than one inch per week.

A lawn with properly prepared soil will also require less frequent watering because it will have a healthier root system. Compacted soils do not hold moisture well and will be difficult to water properly. If your soil is compacted, core aerate often to improve water retention and root structure.

Not everyone can be a turf expert, but it is important to be able to recognize dry turf so you know when to water and when to wait.

Watering Tip #1: When possible, water early in the morning to take advantage of the daily start of the grass's normal growing cycle, lower wind speeds, and less loss of water by evaporation.

Watering Tip #2: Use a rain gauge or a can to measure the amount of water you apply with irrigation. Learn the water requirements of your lawn and look for ways to improve your efficiency.

Watering Tip #3: To check watering uniformity, arrange cans at varying distances from your sprinkler, but within the effective watering range of that sprinkler. Run the sprinkler for a specific amount of time (say, a half-hour). Measure the amount of water in each can, checking for uniformity. Some variation is expected, but a difference of 25-30% or more between any two cans should be addressed by replacing or adjusting the sprinkler system.