

Bluestem Breezes
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June 27, 2016

Summertime Watering

I have a new hobby I picked up recently: watering.....everything. Are you feeling like you added a part-time job to your mornings and evenings this June? I set a sprinkler or soaker hose out and start their timer many mornings and evenings.

And, guess what? I'm still not convinced I'm fulfilling the moisture needs of my garden. During the hot, dry, windy days, our gardens/trees/lawns/flowers need your help.

Of course, always remember when watering that water quantity trumps frequency. It is best to water once or twice per week and water deeply. Here are more tips from K-State Specialist Ward Upham for watering this summer:

Many areas of Kansas went through an extremely wet spring. Gardeners may assume that little watering may be needed this summer as the soils were completely recharged. However, many will likely need to do more watering than they expect.

Rain saturated soils can damage root systems. Excess water drives oxygen out of the soil as pore spaces are filled with water. Every living cell in a plant must have oxygen to live. If there is no oxygen, roots will die. Therefore, many of our plants may need to be babied through the summer, especially since it has turned so hot so quickly.

Newly planted trees are especially vulnerable as they have not established the extensive root system needed to absorb enough water during hot, dry, windy summers. Even trees two or three years old should receive special care even if the root system was not damaged by saturated soils.

Deep, infrequent watering and mulching can help trees become established. Newly transplanted trees need at least 10 gallons of water per week, and on sandy soils they will need that much applied twice a week. The secret is getting that water to soak deeply into the soil, so it evaporates more slowly and is available to the tree's roots longer.

One way to do this is to drill a small hole (1/8") in the side and near the bottom of a 5-gallon bucket and fill it with water. Let the water dribble out slowly next to the tree. Refill the bucket once, and you have applied 10 gallons. Very large transplanted trees and trees that were transplanted two to three years ago will require more water.

A perforated soaker hose is a great way to water larger trees, a newly established bed or a foundation planting. Soaker hoses are notorious for non-uniform watering. In other words, you often receive too much water from one part of the hose and not enough from another. Hooking both the beginning and the end of the soaker hose to a Y-adapter helps equalize the pressure and therefore provide a more uniform watering. The specific parts include the soaker hose, Y-adapter and female to female connector.

It is also helpful if the Y-adapter has shut off valves so the volume of flow can be controlled. Too high a flow rate can allow water to run off rather than soak in.

On larger trees, the soaker hose can circle the trunk at a distance within the dripline of the tree but at least ½ the distance to the dripline. The dripline of the tree is outermost reach of the branches. On smaller trees, you may circle the tree several times so that only soil which has tree roots will be watered.

In sunbaked soil, you may need to rough up the surface with a hoe or tiller to get water to infiltrate easily. It may be helpful to set the kitchen oven timer, so you remember to move the hose or shut off the faucet. If you are seeing surface runoff, reduce the flow.

Regardless of method used, soil should be wet at least 12 inches deep. Use a metal rod, wooden dowel, electric fence post or something similar to check depth. Dry soil is much harder to push through than wet. Record the time that was required to reach 12 inches and then use a time clock for any future waterings. (Ward Upham)

For additional information, visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.