

News Column for Use the Week of October 28, 2024
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Watering Landscape Plants Before Winter

We are having another dry fall. Watering now is important to prevent moisture stress through the winter months. A good, deep watering with moisture reaching at least a foot down into the soil is much better than several light sprinklings that just wet the top portions of the soil. A deep watering will help ensure that the majority of roots have access to water. Soil should be wet at least 12 inches deep. Use a metal rod, wooden dowel, electric fence post turned upside down or something similar to check depth. Dry soil is much harder to push through than wet.

Although all perennial plants will benefit from moist soils before winter, it is especially important to water newly planted trees and shrubs due to limited root systems. Even trees and shrubs planted within the last 2 to 3 years are more sensitive to drought than a well-established plant. Evergreens are also more at risk because moisture is lost from the foliage during the winter months.

Trees or shrubs planted within the last year can be watered inexpensively with a 5-gallon bucket. Drill a small hole (1/8") in the side of the bucket near the bottom. Fill the bucket and let the water dribble out slowly next to the tree. Be sure to keep the bucket a few feet back from the trunk of the tree. Refill the bucket once more, 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 good way to water a newly established bed or foundation plantings. However, 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. 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.

If using a soaker hose, note the time watering was started. Check frequently to determine the amount of time it takes for water to reach 12 inches. From then on, you can water "by the clock." Use a kitchen oven timer so you remember to move the hose or shut off the faucet. If you are seeing surface runoff, reduce the flow, or build a berm with at least a 4-foot diameter around the base of the tree to allow the water to percolate down through the soil, instead of spreading out.

If we have a normal winter, watering once before spring should be adequate. However, if the winter is warm and dry, watering once a month may be needed. If you have any questions, feel free to stop by or contact me in the in the Washington office, 785-325-2121 or by email at khatesohl@ksu.edu.