

Defeating the drought

Avoid wasteful and expensive overwatering; lawns do best with 1 inch of water per week

BONNIE COURTER
Master Gardener

Question: I've been trying to keep my lawn green during this hot summer by watering for two hours every day. However, I was horrified by how high my recent water bill was! And my lawn still looks patchy and brown. How can I maintain a healthy lawn during a drought without going broke?

Answer: First of all, you need to decide what kind of turf you want in your landscape. If you want a lush, green, high-quality lawn, then it is more efficient to irrigate four times a week, applying 1/4 inch of water per session during the summer. Your grass should receive one inch of water each week. Understand that the roots of your lawn grass are mostly in the top one to four inches of soil, so overwatering can be a waste.

Another path, the sustainable one, is to let your lawn go dormant and brown during the dry summer. A brown lawn does not mean that it is dead. Unseen beneath the soil are dormant buds that are very drought tolerant. Once the fall rains begin, your grass will green up again. The only drawback is that a lack of irrigation does allow weeds to gain a foothold, and regular wear and tear use on a dry lawn can lead to compaction. However, a dry lawn will also keep the European crane fly and mole populations in check.

Decide what parts of your lawn to keep green and to what extent. Perhaps, you prefer a green front lawn and can allow the backyard to go dormant.

The key here is to make sure your lawn is healthy. The healthier the turf when a drought begins, the longer it will stay green and be able to survive.

Here are practices that will ensure a healthy lawn:

■ Fertilize four times a year. An easy way to remember when is to apply



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Longing for a lush, green, high quality lawn? Try irrigating four times a week, applying a quarter-inch of water to grass during each watering session.

fertilizer on Mother's Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day and Thanksgiving.

■ Mowing practices are also important. Never remove more than one-third of the grass at one time. Cutting more than one-third leaves the lawn vulnerable to weeds and diseases, so set your mower blades for a grass height of 2-3". Mow once a week during the spring and fall growing seasons, and less often during the summer and winter. Leaving the clippings on the lawn boosts the nitrogen level. A mulching lawnmower is ideal for this, as it doesn't leave unhealthy clumps of cut grass sitting on the lawn.

■ Consider dethatching and over-seeding in the fall to maximize regrowth of dormant turf and to fill in bare spots. Lawns with a lot of thatch are more likely to dry out.

■ In the spring, get a jump on the emergence

of broadleaf weeds, and treat as needed.

■ Water on days that are very hot, but not during the hot part of the day, since much of your water will be lost to evaporation. Slack off when the weather is cooler.

■ The choice of grass seed you use is very important as well. Some grasses are more drought tolerant than others. Steve Renquist, OSU Extension Horticulturist, recently used an "improved tall fescue" grass seed on a new area in his landscape. He was amazed at how green and lush it stayed compared to his other turf areas planted in a perennial rye grass mix, even at this time of year and with minimal irrigation. So, when renovating or starting a new turf area, it might be advisable to try the "improved tall fescue," which can be found at any of the local big box stores.



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Overwatering can be wasteful and cause utility bills to skyrocket, so it's important not to apply more than one inch of water to lawns per week.

Watch your turf for signs of drought stress and wilting. Poke a screwdriver in the soil in several places to see how dry or moist an area might be. Moist soil will allow the screwdriver to penetrate easily while the dry soil will be hard

like cement. If the lawn doesn't look wilted, and the soil is moist, you can put off watering for a day or so, and then check again. After mid-August, lawns need less water to stay green, so reduce watering amounts and frequency

shortly after Labor Day.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672- 4461 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.