



Conserving Water

Solutions for Your Landscape

UF UNIVERSITY of
FLORIDA
IFAS Extension

Lawn Management During Drought

<http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/water>

Florida homeowners can maintain healthy lawns during times of drought or water shortage, even when water management districts (WMDs) have imposed mandatory water restrictions. Most turf damage is actually caused by over-watering, and, in general, watering restrictions provide for sufficient irrigation of most lawngrasses.

Here are some simple maintenance practices you can use to help your lawn best survive dry periods.

Mow High

Grass grows more slowly when there's less water available. So you'll typically mow less during a drought or water shortage.

When you do mow, always mow at the highest recommended height for your grass species. Never remove more than a third of the leaf blade at any one mowing, as this will stress the drought-stressed grass further. Higher mowing encourages deeper rooting, one of the key factors of drought tolerance.

Sharpen Mower Blades

Sharp mower blades make a clean cut on the grass. These cuts heal faster and stress the grass less than a cut made with a dull blade. Mow your lawn when the grass is dry, so that cut grass does not stick to the mower blades and prevent them making the cleanest possible cut.

Water the Right Amount

In many cases, lawns can survive on irrigation of only one to two days per week if 1/2 to 3/4 inches of water is applied each time. But water only if it hasn't rained in the past twenty-four hours.

Never irrigate to the point of run-off. Run-off is water that the roots cannot absorb, which runs into storm drains and eventually into streams, lakes, and other bodies of water, or into groundwater, where our drinking water comes from. Run-off can carry lawn and roadway chemicals and pollutants, and is a plain waste of water.

Irrigation run times should rarely exceed sixty minutes for rotary sprinklers and impact sprinklers, or twenty minutes for spray heads. If irrigation run times exceed these guidelines, be sure your system is not applying more than 3/4 inches of water during a single watering.



The Conserving Water: Solutions for Your Landscape campaign was developed by the Center for Landscape Conservation and Ecology.

Special thanks goes to Dr. Michael Dukes, Dr. Laurie Trenholm, Dr. Sydney Park Brown, St. Johns River Water Management District, Southwest Florida Water Management District, and South Florida Water Management District.

UF UNIVERSITY of
FLORIDA
IFAS
Center for Landscape
Conservation and Ecology

For more information on applying the right amount of water, see “Watering Your Lawn” and “Saving Water Using Your Irrigation System.”

Water Uniformly

Some irrigation systems are improperly designed and don’t distribute irrigation water evenly. The dry areas they can create (parts of the lawn not receiving enough water) are especially obvious during a drought, when rainfall isn’t masking the problem. Place shallow cans in the bad and good areas of your lawn to determine how evenly your system is distributing water.

If your system is not applying water uniformly, contact a qualified irrigation contractor to make any necessary repairs, or try turning or unclogging the sprinkler heads.

Water Early in the Morning

Irrigate early in the morning, preferably between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m., so that grass blades will dry off quickly at sunrise. Extended wet periods can cause turf disease, so watering late in the day or at night is not a good idea. Irrigating between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. is not recommended. This will waste water, because the water will evaporate before it can soak into the soil and be absorbed by the roots.

Postpone or Reduce Fertilizer Applications

Grass is more stressed during droughts and water shortages. The last thing you want your grass to do, under water management restrictions, is to grow more. Hold off on the fertilization until the drought or water shortage has passed. Also, many fertilizers have a high salt content that can actually “burn” grass. You may apply a soluble iron formula, but the resulting green will not last long.

Lawn care professionals have a wider selection of fertilizer materials and application methods available to them than the average homeowner, and they may continue to apply fertilizers at low rates through a dry period.

Postpone Herbicide Applications

Herbicides—weed killers—can stress a healthy lawn even at the best of times. During a drought or water shortage, that stress can limit turf growth and reduce the turf’s ability to compete with weeds. So put off your herbicide applications until the drought or water shortage is over.

Spot-treat Lawn Pests, Only if Needed

Pesticides—chemicals that fight insects and other pests—should be applied only as needed. Spot-treat affected areas, not the entire lawn. These chemicals can damage drought-stressed grass. Always make sure you know what pest you have before embarking on a treatment plan, and always follow label directions. The label is the law.

Consider Using a More Drought-tolerant Turf Species

St. Augustinegrass is the most widely-used lawngrass in Florida, but its drought tolerance (how well it survives dry spells) is not the best. Other grass species, like bahiagrass and centipedegrass, have better drought tolerance. Although these grasses may turn brown during a drought, they are more likely to resume growth and turn green again when rain or irrigation resume. For more information on grass selection, see “Selecting a Turfgrass for Florida Lawns.”