

Friday's Feature

By

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Getting ahead of drought

Most of Florida is currently in a moderate to severe drought. Rainfall, statewide, is many inches below normal for the year. In Northwest Florida, our drought condition ranges from abnormally dry to a moderate drought.

The climate and rainfall patterns in Florida, in combination with patterns of water use in this state, create particular drought challenges.

Periods of low rainfall do occur naturally in Florida. The average annual rainfall in Florida is 54 inches (greater than any other state but Louisiana). The rainfall, however, is not evenly distributed and has some unusual characteristics that tend to produce periods of water shortages. For example, Florida is first, or tied for first, in the country for the proportion of summer versus winter rainfall, the difference in rainfall between the normally wettest and driest months, and the difference in rainfall between relatively wet and dry summers.

To monitor the drought conditions, check the Florida Drought Center at <http://www.drought.unl.edu/dm/monitor.html> for updated current conditions.

Up to one-half of public water supply in Florida is devoted to landscape irrigation. Given Florida's limited water resources, in combination with a rapidly growing population, wise irrigation practices will play an essential role in providing a sustainable water future for our state. Proper landscape design and irrigation system standards can help save significant amounts of water and money, and achieve both attractive landscapes and protection of our natural resources.

We can all take action to prevent drought caused by excessive water use. Practice water conservation at all times by following these tips.

Set priorities. Water highly visible and intensively managed areas first. Drought-sensitive plants should have high priority, and grass should have lower priority.

Water between 2 a.m. and 8 a.m. Watering early in the morning results in less water loss from evaporation and wind drift because of cooler temperatures and less wind.

On established plantings, irrigate deeply at long intervals rather than watering frequently and shallowly. Deep watering improves drought resistance by promoting deeper, more extensive root systems. Depth of watering should be six to twelve inches for turf and bedding plants, and twelve inches for perennials, shrubs, and trees. One inch of irrigation wets a sandy soil to a depth of about twelve inches.

Be sure that your irrigation system works properly. Examine the irrigation system and repair leaks promptly. Make sure the water lands on your plants and grass and not on paved areas.

Make the most out of rainwater. Turn downspouts from rain gutters towards areas with plantings. Rainwater can also be collected and stored in a rain barrel for dry spells.

Avoid excessive fertilization. Don't fertilize or, if you do, use a low nitrogen fertilizer. Fertilization stimulates growth and increases water needs.

Raise the cutting height of turf. Although taller grass uses slightly more water than shorter grass, a higher cutting height promotes deeper rooting and maintains turf quality longer.

Add mulch to beds to reduce evaporation from soil and to moderate soil temperature, reducing stress on roots. Final depth of your mulch should be three to four inches after settling.

If possible, don't use overhead sprinklers for shrub and flower beds. Hand water, flood irrigate, or use trickle irrigation. Greater water loss can occur with overhead irrigation because of evaporation and wind drift.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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