Water-wise Yard and Garden Care

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You may wonder why you should be concerned about water-wise gardening in a year in which we are receiving so much rain. However, if you are trying to keep your yard fresh looking in the heat of the summer you are going to have to do some watering. I can think of several important reasons why you should be careful about how you water. Most important to many is that you can substantially reduce the cost of watering if you are careful. Seventy percent of municipal water goes to residential use, and of that 50 percent goes to landscapes.

Of equal importance are two other factors. Proper watering is necessary for healthy plants. Excess watering can produce foliage at the expense of fruits, vegetables and flowers. Excess shallow watering encourages shallow root systems and weak plants. Proper watering also reduces the pollution in our watershed. Excess water drains off your property, carrying pollutants like fertilizer, herbicides, insecticides and pet waste into storm drains, streams and local rivers. All of this waste eventually ends up in Chesapeake Bay.

This rain barrel at Lincoln Elementary school is used by the Jr. Master Gardener Club to water its butterfly garden.

OK, what can you do?

1. **Allow your lawn to go dormant.** Cut your lawn to a height of two inches to protect the roots, and stop watering it. Do not put any fertilizer or other chemicals on it until fall. It may turn brown, but even if we receive no rain for the rest of the summer, your lawn will not die. It will green-up in fall or spring. The added bonus to this approach is you will be able to stop cutting your lawn. Of course, if you are just establishing a new lawn (less than one year old), you must continue watering to keep it alive.

2. **Put a rain barrel(s) under your downspout** to collect water to use in irrigating plants. One-eighth inch of rain on an average roof will fill a 60-gallon rain barrel. Excess rain that does not go into the barrel can be directed to a garden that will absorb it. Also, direct water from downspouts that do not have barrels into gardens or areas where it can be absorbed.

3. **Water trees, shrubs and plants in order of priority.** Because they are substantial investments, your first priority should go to newly planted trees and shrubs. Then water perennials, vegetables, fruit and nut trees and shallow-rooted established shrubs. Finally, if you have the time, water annuals. You will have to water most container gardens every day in order to keep them alive and fresh. If watering becomes too much of a burden, consider allowing container gardens and other annuals to die early. You may also put container plants in the ground to reduce their watering needs.

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4. Use efficient watering techniques. The best time of the day to water is in the morning, when it is cool and evaporation is at a minimum. Furthermore, if you get the plants wet, they will dry quickly, minimizing the opportunity for diseases to develop. If you cannot water in the morning, evening is the next best time. Water slowly and as deeply as your soil drainage conditions will allow. This will encourage deep roots and healthier plants, and you will not have to water every day. Frequent light watering actually does more harm than good because it encourages shallow root growth. Mulch your gardens to help hold the moisture in.

Use a watering can, or a hose with a bubbler on it to water. Repair leaking hose connections or make sure that leaky connection is lying somewhere where water is needed. Leaking hose connections can waste up to 50 percent of the water flowing through a hose. Water directly at the base of the plants and try to avoid getting foliage wet. Other good options are to use soaker hoses or install a drip system. Both are efficient in their use of water.

Use overhead sprinklers only as a last resort. They are extremely inefficient, allowing for a lot of evaporation and generally watering too shallowly. They also cause water to run off the landscape when they throw water on paved surfaces.

Other, less immediate things that you can do to water wisely in the future, include –

5. Plant only in the spring and fall, when temperatures are lower and water loss from the soil is reduced. This is also an easier time for new plantings to become established. Make small earthen basins around newly planted trees and shrubs to catch water and hold it for roots to absorb.

6. Reduce paved surfaces and lawn areas. They are the greatest source of runoff. Consider using gravel, wood chips, stepping-stones and bricks on sand, and other water permeable materials for driveways and walkways. For existing paved areas that are not going to be replaced devise features that will direct runoff into garden areas. Replace sections of your lawns with drought tolerant groundcovers.

7. Select Plants Carefully. Put water-loving plants together and drought tolerant plants together. This will enable you to water more efficiently. If you do not have a naturally moist area, use primarily drought tolerant plants. Native plants are particularly good because they are fully adapted to our climate. If you have an area that holds water when it rains, and stays wetter than other areas, plant a rain garden containing native plants that normally grow on the edge of wetlands.

These are just a few things that you can do to save dollars and water, improve the health of your plants, and improve the health of our waterways and the Chesapeake Bay.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301-600-1596, or visit http://www.frederick.umd.edu/. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.