

## How to Make the Most of Your Precious Water in Dry Times

Someone asked me the other day if our current lack of rainfall is as bad now as it was in the drought of 2011. I looked up our rainfall records at our house and found that we have had more than twice as much rain in the first half of 2018 as we did in 2011, and even if I look at the total rainfall for the 9 months preceding the end of June in 2018 compared to 2011, again we have had more than twice as much rain this year than in 2011.

So no, things are not as bad now as there were in 2011, at least not yet. But we do certainly have a lot of plants going dormant and others being stressed. And if we don't get some rain soon, we may indeed lose some plants, especially forbs.

We cannot and should not waste water, but we don't want our plants to die either. So what should we do? The answer, I think, is to use water wisely and efficiently, and if you are in the city, conform to water restriction regulations.

As the drought continues, different plants will suffer to different degrees. In general, the least xeric and most recently planted plants will suffer the most, followed by established plants native to higher rainfall areas, followed by well-established native plants and mature native trees, and finally xeric (drought-tolerant) plants from more arid areas such as West Texas. Live oaks seem to be less stressed by drought than post oaks, blackjack oaks, Spanish oaks or escarpment black cherries. Most grasses will go dormant and turn brown but then green up again when the rains come.

Here are some general things to keep in mind about watering plants.

Water deeply but infrequently. Watering lightly daily or every 2 or 3 days is a waste of water (except for newly planted forbs and perennials). Also, don't water the foliage, it doesn't help and may harm the plant. For trees, water under the dripline (the circle under the tree just under the outermost leaves), not around the trunk. The feeder roots are mostly concentrated in that area.

Don't be fooled by some of the drizzles or light rains we get. Anything less than a quarter inch is pretty much useless as far as most trees, shrubs and perennials are concerned—the foliage gets wet but water doesn't reach the soil.

The best watering system by far is drip irrigation. By positioning water-emitting half-inch or quarter-inch in-line tubing (I would recommend you avoid any sprinkler/sprayer type emitters) around flower beds, shrubs and trees, you can not only know exactly how much water each plant is getting, and adjust it if necessary, but the water drips directly on the soil with the absolute minimum amount lost to evaporation.

If you have too much mulch around shrubs or flower beds brush it away from the area you are watering so you can get the water to the mineral soil where the roots live, not just on the top mulch. You can rake the mulch back after watering. If you don't have mulch covering bare ground between your plants, get some...it is the best thing you can do for your plants.

Unfortunately, lawns are the biggest water-waster we have and we would all be better off if we had less of it. But that is all hindsight. If you are trying to maintain a lawn, at least water it only in the evening or early morning, preferably when it is not windy. The automatic sprinkler systems most people have wastes a lot of water to evaporation. Mow infrequently and as high as you can set the mower. And if the grass has gone dormant, remember the old saying, "If it ain't growing, don't be mowing."

Speaking of hindsight, capturing rainwater when it rains to then use later when it doesn't would seem to be an obvious thing for all of to do in this semi-arid land. Maybe these hot dry days are a time to think about remodeling your landscape to decrease lawn area, increase native forbs, perennials and vines, add a drip irrigation system and install some rainwater catchment—because this dry spell isn't over, and we will have another dry spell after this one sometime.

Until next time...

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