



Lawn Irrigation

Even if homeowners follow the recommended summer management practices, irrigation is often necessary to prevent lawns from becoming dormant during extended rain-free periods. Without rainfall, a lawn will normally require supplemental irrigation of approximately 1.0 inch water per week to keep the lawn green. A concern with this recommendation is that most turfgrass areas will encounter runoff if this amount of water is applied in one irrigation event. Runoff can be minimized if irrigation is performed every 4 to 5 days with 0.50 to 0.75 inch applied. Another option is to irrigate until runoff begins, delay irrigation for 1 to 2 hours to permit infiltration, then resume the watering activity under this format until the desired amount of water has been applied to the lawn.

The amount of water applied during irrigation can be measured by placing several empty straight-sided containers, such as pet food containers, in the sprinkler's pattern. Watering is sufficient once the desired volume of water is collected in the containers. Irrigation should be performed early in the morning. At this time of day the grass is already wet from dew, temperatures are cooler, humidity is high and calm conditions usually exist. These conditions all favor infiltration of the water into the soil and utilization of the supplemental water by the turfgrass plants.

When the water supply for lawn irrigation is limited or when watering restrictions are in place, the homeowner should designate priority areas of the lawn and water those areas first. The priority areas usually include the front lawn, areas around the patio or deck, and children's play areas.

If the homeowner cannot water, or elects not to water a dormant lawn, a light watering or rainfall of 1/2 inch every two to three weeks will help minimize damage to the lawn during the dormancy period. This watering practice will supply enough moisture to keep crowns, rhizomes and roots hydrated and alive. This volume of water will not regreen a dormant lawn, however, it will help to insure good recovery once rainfall occurs later in the summer.

Dormancy is characterized by the development of brown turfgrass. The turfgrass is not dead but instead in a condition to preserve the vital parts of the plant. By becoming dormant, turfgrasses reduce water usage and can concentrate the limited amount of available moisture into the crown, rhizomes and roots. This dormant condition will allow the turfgrass plant to survive adverse conditions for extended periods until soil moisture reserves are replenished. The length of time lawn grasses can survive in a dormant condition is contingent on a number of factors including soil moisture levels, daytime temperatures, condition of the turfgrass at the onset of dormancy, etc. In general, turfgrasses can be expected to survive in a dormant condition for up to 4 to 5 weeks with limited damage if temperatures are at or below normal. If daytime temperatures are elevated (mid-80's or higher) consistently through the stress period, only 3 to 4 weeks of survival should be anticipated. Dormant grass is lost once the crowns, rhizomes and roots begin to dehydrate. Homeowners will often find the areas of the lawn along sidewalks, curbs, driveways, south facing slopes, etc., to encounter the most stress and will be the first areas to be lost during extended periods of drought.

Homeowners have limited control over the daytime temperatures in the lawn. However, they can improve the survivability of the turfgrass in their lawn by proper management. The mowing height should be a minimum of 2.53.0 inches prior to, and during, drought periods. Taller cut grass will have deeper, more extensive root systems than short cut grass which will help enable the turfgrass plants to withstand summer stresses. Taller cut turfgrass will provide more shading of the soil thereby keeping soil temperatures cooler and reducing evaporation of soil moisture. Mow the lawn only as needed and preferably during the morning or evening hours when less stress is being imposed on the lawn. Also, make certain the mower blades are properly sharpened to avoid "tearing" the ends of the grass blades.