

Gardeners Should Prepare for Another Dry Year

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The northern Gulf Coast is generally considered to be one of the wettest areas in the country. Normally we receive between 65 and 70 inches of rainfall per year. This has not been the case recently.

We are into our fourth year of drought. Weather records in some areas of north Florida reveal that last year's rainfall was only one-third of the annual average. For example, through April of this year, one weather site in Pensacola recorded slightly over 8 inches, while the average for this period is almost 23 inches.

We are seeing the effects of this extended drought on area landscapes. Some trees are dying as a direct or indirect result of the long term lack of sufficient rainfall. This is a "weeding out" process, naturally eliminating marginally healthy trees that under normal soil moisture conditions, might have lived on indefinitely.

Some shallow coastal irrigation wells are turning salty as a result of over-pumping. Salt water intrusion can have a devastating effect upon many salt sensitive plants that are currently being used in the landscape.

Shrub and perennial beds are suffering from the lack of a periodic deep watering. Normal rainfall covers a multitude of irrigation errors, but when there is little or none falling from the sky, the use of improper practices and inadequate systems becomes evident.

Gardeners should prepare for another dry growing season. Even if we are fortunate enough to return to more normal patterns of rainfall, these practices will be helpful anyway.

Know how much water your sprinkler system is delivering during each irrigation? If not, place 6 straight-sided cans, at random, in the area to be irrigated. Making note of the time, run the system and learn how long it takes to deliver one-half surface inch for lawn irrigation and three-fourths inch for shrub plantings. You are going to be surprised because many gardeners, thinking that they are watering thoroughly, are only wetting the soil surface.

Water on an "as needed basis," rather than on a schedule. Established lawns, shrubs, vegetables and flowers should not be watered daily. Daily light sprinklings result in shallow, weak root systems and the increased incidence of disease problems.

Select tougher, more drought tolerant landscape plant species and cultivars. Contact your local Extension office for a list.

Group plants that have a high soil moisture requirement, and keep the size of these beds to a minimum.

Irrigate during the early morning hours in order to reduce the amount of water lost to evaporation.

Maintain a 2 to 3 inch deep layer of coarse mulch on the soil surface beneath shrubs, flowers and vegetables.

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This practice reduces the loss of soil moisture and moderates soil temperatures.

Consider having the lawn, shrub plantings, flower beds and vegetable garden on separate irrigation zones. These areas require different irrigation intervals and amounts. Though this requires the retrofitting of a system, it can result in healthier plants and water savings.

Microirrigation is a good alternative for shrub, flower and vegetable beds. Check out some of the new systems that include the use of spinners, bubblers, spray heads and drip applicators. Studies reveal that microirrigation often uses only one-fourth as much water when compared to standard overhead sprinkler irrigation.

Northwest Florida has been blessed with plenty of water in the past, but it is now time for us gardeners to implement water conserving practices. We certainly don't wish to deplete this valuable resource and experience the disagreements and severe water restrictions being experienced further South in the state.

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For more information about gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension website at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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