Make Your Landscape More Water-Efficient

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Dicliptera loves hot, dry sites and is a good choice for a low water-use zone in your landscape.

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The dry weather this spring and early summer, coupled with high temperatures, has resulted in a number of landscape plant deaths. Watering is critical in weather like this. Yet, you may be realizing, especially if you have a large landscape, that it is almost impossible to keep everything watered. There are a number of things you can do to help make your landscape more water-efficient without having to resort to the extreme of nothing but cacti and rocks.

Water conservation is an important issue facing all Floridians today. As much as sixty percent of all household water use during the summer months is used outdoors. Unfortunately, much of this water is wasted by people who don’t know how to water and when to water.

Proper landscape planning and design are the keys to a more water-efficient landscape. An efficient water use design includes dividing the landscape into three water-use zones: low, medium, and high.

Low water-use zones require little to no supplemental water after the plants are established. Remember, though, that it can be several months before plants become established to the point where they have grown a significant number of roots out of the original rootball and into surrounding soil. So even low water-use zones will require some water immediately after planting.
Moderate water-use zones contain those plants that require some supplemental irrigation during hot, dry periods. That’s the type of weather many of us have been having. And high water-use zones are those plants that will need to be watered any time we are not receiving several rains a week. Limit high water-use zones to small areas, such as the home’s entrance, where you desire high visual impact.

Because shade from trees helps cool the landscape by as much as twenty degrees and consequently reduces water loss, designing gardens in shaded areas of the landscape is an easy way of reducing water use. Be sure to select plants, though, that will grow well in the shade. If you don’t have shade trees, plant some at appropriate distances and locations from the house. They will also reduce your electric bill.

Be practical with your use of lawn areas. Locate lawngrass only in areas of the landscape where it will provide the most functional benefit such as recreational areas or on slopes to prevent erosion. And realize, too, that groundcovers are sometimes better alternatives than lawngrass. For example, perennial or ornamental peanut, with its plentiful yellow flowers, can be a beautiful option for a sunny slope that you don’t want to mow. Liriope, Mondo grass, or ferns can be great alternatives to lawngrasses in areas too shaded to grow grass.

It is extremely inefficient to water your lawn every time you water other plants, such as bedding plants or new shrubs. So keep lawngrasses completely separate from ornamental plants in the landscape so that they can be watered separately. Most lawngrasses can be located in any of the three water-use zones, but the amount and frequency of irrigation should be adjusted accordingly.

Only water plants that really need to be watered. An irrigation system is nothing more than a tool to supplement rainfall. When rainfall is sufficient to keep the plants healthy, turn the irrigation off. Most well established ornamental plants and turfgrasses can survive long dry periods without supplemental irrigation. Daily watering is bad for plants in the landscape. It encourages shallow root systems, causing plants to demand more water, and can create conditions favorable for disease problems.

Midday watering of turf areas is not recommended because much of the applied water can be lost due to evaporation and wind blowing the water off-target. Water between 9:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. to minimize evaporation and foliar diseases. For example, you may program your irrigation to come on at 1:00 a.m. and go off at 6:00 a.m. This minimizes the evaporation of water and minimizes the amount of time the leaf surface of the plants will stay wet.

Drip or micro-irrigation is a much more efficient way to water ornamental plant beds, vegetable gardens, and fruit garden areas. It places the water where it’s needed without wasting water. It is also extremely useful when you are planting new plants because you can place the water right in the rootball of the young plant. It is very difficult to sufficiently water new plants in an efficient manner with overhead irrigation.
Mulch is vital to a water-efficient landscape. Mulch helps conserve soil moisture and keeps the root area cooler during hot, dry weather. A two to three inch layer of organic mulch such as pine straw, pine bark mini-nuggets, or woodchips helps create a more water-efficient landscape.

Try to match the right plant for the site conditions and preserve as many of the native plants as possible. Native plants are generally well adapted in a non-disturbed environment and may require no supplemental irrigation.

During dry weather, mowing turfgrasses so that no more than one-third of the leaf tissue is removed at each mowing will reduce plant stress and water demand. Reduce fertilization during dry weather because it can damage plant roots in dry soils and can create succulent growth that loses more water.