Planting Projects with No Irrigation

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Even drought-tolerant plants such as this yucca will benefit from an irrigation system during the first year or so after planting.

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When we're sometimes lucky here in the South to have our daily afternoon thunderstorms, we have a tendency to think that plants are getting all the water that they need. While this is generally true for your established landscapes, new plantings may still be struggling.

It's important to remember that landscape plants undergo stress when moving from a nursery to a planting location. One of the main things the plants need to keep them healthy, especially in the heat of summer, is water. The new plant's root system is no larger than the container size from which it was planted. In the nursery the plant was receiving water every day. So when the plant goes into the landscape it will need more than just the occasional rain shower to keep it alive, especially for the first year or two after planting.

Water has always been a precious resource for us and with the emphasis on native landscaping and green building, people are taking more care to use water effectively and efficiently. Sometimes those of us in the landscape business are requested to design and install a landscape without the use of an irrigation system. While this may sound like a sound environmental strategy, the reality is that, depending on the soils, plant material and weather, it may actually take more water and more energy to keep these plants alive if there is no irrigation.

On a project that has no irrigation, the plants will still need to be watered regularly, which is done either with hoses on a smaller project or water trucks on a larger one. This is nowhere near

as efficient as a properly designed irrigation system which will ensure that water goes only where it is needed with minimal loss. Using manpower and hoses, or manpower and a large vehicle in addition to a great deal of water, is not environmentally friendly at all.

Occasionally, a site will have soil that is perfect for holding just the right amount of water, and rains will come at just the right times. But this requires a great deal of luck and, in reality, doesn't usually happen. There is often a great deal of plant loss on sites that don't have an irrigation system. Even if the plants don't completely die, the rate of plant growth is usually delayed considerably over that of plants on an irrigated site.

The main problem that we see in attempting to water sites by hand instead of with an automated, professionally designed, installed and programmed system is that there is a lot of guess work involved. Plants may be under-watered, or even sometimes over-watered, and this puts a great deal of stress on the plants. A thorough deep watering is important to establish a good root system and manual watering just doesn't always get enough water into the ground and into the area of the roots. This can result in shallow, weak roots and stressed plants as well as disappointing results and additional costs.

While irrigation systems are not always the best solution for every project, it makes sense to really evaluate your site, your budget and your expectations to determine what is right for you.

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