

The Quest for Less Thirsty Turf

By Brent Mecham; from *the Lawn Institute*, Spring 2004



Celebration is a great choice for home landscapes, as well as commercial, sports and golf applications. Celebration offers excellent color and texture, as well as lower maintenance and water needs.

Are there water restrictions in your town that have affected your desire to plant a new lawn or maintain your existing one? Or perhaps you are being asked to choose a particular type of grass or reduce your grassy areas. If so, you are not alone. More and more areas of the country face water shortages caused either by Mother Nature in the form of a drought, or are caused by real estate surges where water supply cannot keep up with demand. Because there is less water to go around, homeowners are being asked to adjust their landscape maintenance habits. The good news is that we can train turf to use less water. To do this let's take a look at four major areas of lawn maintenance that will reduce how much water your lawn will need:

(1) Expectations: Most of us have an expectation that our lawn will look like grass seen on a golf course or a professional sports stadium. However, most of us are not willing to pay for the type of care it takes to have a lawn that looks nearly perfect. In reality, most of us can be quite happy with a lawn that looks nice and is functional, but does not require intensive fertilizing, mowing and watering.

(2) Fertilizing: When our expectations are realistic, we can maintain healthy lawns with less fertilizer. By reducing the amount recommended, for example, there will be less growth and less demand for water. In addition, by using a slow-release variety, growth will be more constant or even. Less fertilizing does not mean your yard should be ignored. Studies have shown that a healthy lawn, generated through proper maintenance, will actually use less water and will have fewer weed and insect problems.

(3) Mowing: Raising mowing heights to the highest acceptable level encourages deep rooting. The general consensus among turf experts is to keep heights at or near 3" during times of drought. When cutting, it is recommended that only one-third of the leaf blade be removed at a time. Also suggested is mulch mowing, because it returns nutrients to the soil, does not cause thatch build-up, and reduces landfill waste. Most beneficial to you is it saves you time! Remember to keep the mower blade sharp so that it will cut the grass cleanly. Ripped grass blade edges turn brown quickly, and make your lawn appear to need water.

(4) Watering: Poor watering practices can cause many landscape problems. It has been shown that those who water with hoses over-water by 10%, while people who have automatic sprinkler systems overwater by 20-30% or more, according to studies conducted by the Denver Water Board. Irrigation systems have the potential to be very efficient, but only if the schedule is adjusted frequently to apply the amount of water the lawn truly needs, and the sprinkler system itself is well maintained. Lawn watering needs can be determined by measuring soil moisture levels or by tracking changing weather systems. There are many new controllers or add-on components to existing controllers that are able to do this automatically.

Maintenance may require sprinkler head adjustments and fixing leaks. It has been shown that providing 20-25% less water than amounts listed with the system may actually be ideal for a home lawn.

Observing the lawn and monitoring the signs of a thirsty lawn are critical to being a wise water manager. The signs are:

1) Footprinting. After a person has walked across the lawn, the footprints are still visible an hour or more later.

2) Color change. The grass color changes from lush green to a bluish-gray color. When you see either of these signs, it is time to water. The lawn will recover very quickly, but if you delay watering, it could go into dormancy and turn brown. However, don't apply more water than the soil can hold in the grass root zone. Depending upon the type of grass and the care given in preparing the soil prior to planting the lawn, most of the grass roots will be about 6-12" deep on sandy soils, and 4-8" deep on heavy clay-type soils. If you can push a probe (such as a long screwdriver) easily into the ground to the depth of the roots, then it has adequate moisture. If not, you will need to water more. If you are fortunate enough to have an automatic sprinkler system, adjust your watering program often to fit the watering needs of the lawn, using the guidelines listed above. As stated previously, these needs may already be programmed into your system. Advanced irrigation systems provide water to lawns only when needed, allowing for effortless lawn care management. A healthy lawn begins by modifying your expectations and adjusting your fertilizing, mowing and watering routines. By following the steps above, your yard will quest for less water and still look great this summer!

Editor's Suggestion:

Another option that homeowners have when taking steps to use less water in the landscape is to select turfgrasses that naturally use less water. When it is time to advise a customer on a lawn installation or renovation -- or to initiate one for your own property -- consider turfgrass varieties that are efficient water users. You can contact your local county extension office for suggestions on suitable turfgrasses for your area. We also suggest that you visit sodsolutions.com for information about EMPIRE Zoysia and Celebration Bermudagrass, two improved varieties whose lower water needs and drought tolerant qualities have been demonstrated and documented.



EMPIRE Zoysia's massive root system is an essential element of its durability and drought tolerance.

About the Author:

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