It is not to have them thrive, but rather to have them stay alive.

Due to the prolonged extreme heat we have been experiencing, that should be the goal for most gardeners these days. Determining the water needs of plants has always been influenced by the weather. I read that 50% of the water used by the average household under normal growing conditions goes for outdoor landscape plants. Presently, that percentage is askew. With the temperature consistently cranking over a hundred for the past number of weeks, most homeowners are finding it difficult to keep up with watering. Furthermore, many municipalities are starting to put restrictions on water use. Reducing home water use has become a major issue. Perhaps this is not the time to achieve a lush, picture-perfect, green yard, but rather to keep your plants alive. Even when water is in ample supply, reducing water usage is always a good idea. Reduced watering can decrease maintenance time and reduce costs while lessoning the demand on municipal water supplies and treatment plants.

Water management in the home landscape involves a few basic principles. Although the hot weather is a major factor governing water usage, other factors include plant species, soil conditions, site locations, and cultural practices.

Good water management involves selecting appropriate, quality plants. We've all heard, "You get what you pay for." Although there is some logic in that statement, paying more doesn't always guarantee a quality plant; however, a cheap plant is rarely a bargain. Become familiar with a plant's general health and its requirements before you purchase. Choose plants that match the landscape. For example, select plants with high water requirements that perhaps will be growing in poorly drained areas; whereas, select drought tolerant plants for dry areas. Group plants according to their water usage requirements.

Another managing principle to conserve water in the landscape is paying attention to soil conditions. Often, the soil on sites where home construction took place is far from ideal. Buried construction debris may interfere with drainage and root development. Runoff wastes water. Landscape soils often consist of compacted layers containing little organic matter. Adding organic matter to the soil is the most important step to improve the infiltration of water. Commonly available soil amendments include compost, leaves and leaf mold, lawn clippings, peat moss, straw, hay, and animal manures. Through decomposition, microorganisms breakdown the organic materials creating a black, water-absorbing substance called humus. Humus increases the water holding capacity of the soil making water more readily available to the plant roots.

Site characteristics also influence water management. Obviously, exposure to the elements and slope of the land dictate how much supplemental water landscape plants will need. Those areas exposed to full sun and drying winds will require more water than those that are protected or shaded. Buildings and structures can also have an effect on water usage. For example, foundation plantings, growing where eaves block rainfall will generally require additional supplemental watering.

Lastly, how we conduct our cultural practices plays a major role in water management. I offer a few tips to consider in managing and conserving water during these difficult times.

- Avoid shearing trees and shrubs at this time. Shearing stimulates new growth thus increasing demands for more water.
- Control weeds to eliminate competition for soil moisture.
- Use organic mulch around plants to reduce water loss and suppress weeds.
- Water early in the mornings.
- To maintain vigor of trees and shrubs, soak the soil to a minimum depth of twelve inches out to the drip line every three to four weeks.
- Turn automatic sprinkler systems on and off manually to support plant growth and conserve water.
- Mulch-mow and cut bluegrass lawns to a minimum height of two and one-half inches.
- Bluegrass lawns can go dormant but should receive ¼ to ½ inch of water every two to three weeks simply to keep the grass plants alive.

Let's hope we soon will get a break from this scorching heat. Remember, it is always a wise choice to be water conscious. Good water management benefits everyone. For now, rather than make plants thrive, let's just water enough to keep them alive.