

Yard and Garden - 01-014-2012 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Chances are that nearly two months ago you shut down your irrigation system and rolled up your garden hose. After all, we gardeners normally do that in preparation for winter. Although we have experienced a few light snow showers over the past couple months — along with cloudy skies, foggy mornings, and heavy frosts — lately we have been enjoying unseasonably warm days with temperatures climbing into the fifties.

Today, January 4, 2012, as I begin writing this column, the five-day forecast is for daytime temperatures to reach into the sixties. Obviously, these weather conditions are totally out of the norm for January. Somewhat concerned, I checked with the University of Nebraska's website titled *Crop Watch* to observe a few statistics. I wanted to know where we stand regarding precipitation as well as soil temperatures in the Kearney area. I discovered that from September 1, 2011, to January 3, 2012, the Kearney area has received 6.29 inches of precipitation. That calculates to 109% of normal precipitation — obviously good news. Furthermore, in the Kearney area the average seven-day soil temperature from December 28, 2011, to January 4, 2012, was 34.2° F. That, too, was good news. In spite of all this good news, are you aware that your landscape plants might still need water?

We have all heard the saying, “If you don't like the weather. wait five minutes, and it will change.” That certainly seems to hold true for Nebraska's weather. Perhaps by the time you are reading this column, we may be knee-deep in snow with temperatures in the single digits. On the other hand, we may still be experiencing unseasonably warm weather. Consider this. Winter watering is one of the best ways to protect your landscape plants from desiccating, a major cause of “winter kill.”

During bright, sunny, warm, winter days, many plants — and especially evergreens — release significant amounts of water vapor to the atmosphere through a process called transpiration. To offset this water loss, the plant's roots absorb water from the soil — providing the soil is not frozen. If the soil becomes too dry, the reverse occurs. Dry soil actually pulls water from the roots. Whether the loss of water occurs to the atmosphere or to the soil, plants can desiccate— a situation that can potentially kill. Fortunately, my inquiry revealed that we are not in a drought, but one does not need to be a rocket scientist to realize that continuously warm, unseasonably dry air temperatures create dry soil conditions.

Assuming temperatures continue to be unseasonably warm and the soil remains unfrozen, your landscape plants, and especially trees, will benefit from a winter watering. It may be time to drag out the garden hose. To that, I offer a few watering tips.

- Water only when air temperatures are above 40°F, which usually translates into a 5-hour window from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
- Stop watering before the temperatures drop to allow the water to percolate into the soil.
- How much water your tree should receive depends upon the tree size: A general rule of thumb is to use approximately 10 gallons of water per inch of trunk diameter. Measure

the trunk diameter at knee height. General formula: Tree Diameter x 5 min. = Total Watering Time.

- The most important area to water for deciduous trees is within the drip line. For conifers, water three to five feet beyond the drip line.
- Continue to monitor weather conditions and water during extended dry periods without snow cover.
- Avoid watering if the soil is frozen.
- Avoid damage to hydrant or hose by disconnecting and draining after watering.

Keep in mind: newly planted trees are more susceptible to winter desiccation than established trees. Although we might receive abundant moisture during the winter, pay special attention to those shrubs and trees close to the house foundation or located under the eaves—both areas where less moisture is received. These plantings often receive reflected heat from buildings and walls, subjecting them to even more damage.

While you are outdoors enjoying this wonderfully warm weather (if it's still wonderfully warm), consider grabbing the garden hose and giving your landscape plants a winter's drink. I am confident they would thank you if they could.