

Lawn Irrigation

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Extension horticulturists are asked how much water does a lawn need and how frequent should they be watered. We are also asked if lawns can be left to go dormant in summer to conserve water.

Basic recommendations in Nebraska have been to provide turfgrass with one to one and one-half inches of water per week from rainfall and/or irrigation. However, different types of grass have different requirements and respond differently to dry periods.

Homeowners also have varying preferences for their lawns appearance. Following one rule for all turfgrass leads to water waste, as does the “set it and forget it” method often used with automatic systems.

For turfgrass, staying on the dry side is healthier than overwatering. If a Kentucky bluegrass lawn is turning yellow, check the soil. If it is quite wet, turn off irrigation and only turn it on when soil begins to dry or the lawn shows signs of needing irrigation.

While bluegrass yellowing is due to iron chlorosis, it is compounded by hot and wet soils. This is why we only see yellowing in mid to late summer. We can't change the weather to have cooler soils but we can manage irrigation to avoid continuously wet soils.

Common grasses grown in Nebraska are Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue and buffalograss. Bluegrass and fescue are cool season grasses. They grow best during spring and fall and need summer irrigation to maintain green color. They are not as drought or heat tolerant as buffalograss, a warm season grass.

Bluegrass discolors and slows growth if water is limited. During dry conditions it has the ability to go dormant, turn brown, to escape drought without dying. If a homeowner is not tolerant of a dormant summer turf, bluegrass needs the most frequent irrigation due to its shallow root system.

If Kentucky bluegrass is allowed to go dormant, and conditions remain dry and hot (above 80°F.), apply one-fourth to one-half inch of water every 2 to 3 weeks to hydrate crowns but not green up turf. Bluegrass can remain dormant for 4 to 5 weeks. Cooler fall temperatures and fall rain will bring it out of dormancy. If not, irrigation needs to resume.

Tall fescue tolerates dry periods better than bluegrass. It has deeper roots that can use moisture deeper in the soil. Discoloration during normal dry periods is unusual for tall fescue. However, it does not have the ability to go dormant to avoid drought.

If tall fescue begins to turn off-color from lack of water during summer, it needs irrigation or it can die. While it uses more soil moisture due to deeper roots, it is considered a turfgrass to use to conserve water since it requires less frequent irrigation in central and eastern Nebraska.

To maintain a green summer turf, Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue need irrigation when they begin to show signs of water stress. These signs include a bluish color, footprints or wheel tracks remaining in the turf after it is walked on or mowed, and rolled or folded grass blades.

When these signs are seen, water long enough to moisten the soil 4 to 6 inches deep while avoiding water running off the lawn into the street or pooling in other landscape areas. Then shut off irrigation until the signs are observed again.

Buffalograss tolerates drought due to deep roots and heat tolerance. It also has the ability to go dormant during summer drought. Once established, buffalograss rarely needs irrigation in most of Nebraska. It will green up later and go dormant earlier and is grayish green in color compared to bluegrass and fescue.