

Water Wise Landscape Tips  
By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator  
Release: Week of May 2, 2022

Water is essential to life and has no substitute. Water wise practices that conserve and protect water resources are something we all need to consider using.

During the growing season, it is estimated 40 percent or more of water use is for landscape irrigation. In many cases, the water used for this purpose is water that has been treated to drinking water standards.

Water treatment and distribution of water to users can be energy intensive. Finding ways to reduce the irrigation needs of lawns and landscapes and finding alternative sources of water for plant irrigation are needed.

Think about changes you can make in the landscape and with irrigation practices to help conserve water. A common change needed is to not set the lawn irrigation system and forget it.

Automatic irrigation systems should remain turned off, and only turned on when soil is beginning to dry and turfgrass is showing signs of needing irrigation. Irrigate during early morning hours when there is less wind and heat.

Friable soils that water readily infiltrates but which have good water holding capacity lead to more efficient use of rain and irrigation water. If soils are compacted, water tends to run off rather than soak in. If soils are sandy, water moves through too quickly. Clay soils can have low oxygen levels which hinder root growth.

Efforts targeted at improving and maintaining soils can help conserve water. Avoiding compaction by not working soils when wet and reducing traffic, especially on wet soils, are water wise. Regular core aeration or plugging of lawns relieves soil compaction.

Amending soil with organic matter will improve infiltration of rain and irrigation water into soils and increase a soils water holding capacity. For example, apply a light layer of compost to lawns and rake it into aeration holes.

There is a trend towards selecting native or near native plants adapted to the growing site. By selecting the right plant for the growing conditions, native plants often do not require supplemental irrigation. Once established, many native plants do fine with average precipitation provided by nature.

Native plants tend to have deep roots and are better able to take advantage of soil moisture. These roots are continually growing and dying so they also improve soil by creating channels for drainage and decomposing to increase organic matter in soil.

Using alternative water sources for plant irrigation can help reduce demand on drinking water supplies. Rainwater is an alternative source. On most properties, rainwater is treated as a nuisance to be moved off the property as quick as possible with downspouts, driveways, curbs and gutters.

A growing trend is to catch rainwater to infiltrate into soil or temporarily store for later use. This is being done with the use of rain barrels, cisterns, rain gardens and bioswales. Directing downspouts onto planted areas and not the driveway is a small start to making the most of rainwater when we receive it.

To help reduce the amount of water used for landscaped, select native and adapted plants that require less water; manage soils to promote good drainage along with good water holding capacity; use efficient irrigation practices; and consider alternative water sources for plant irrigation.