

Landscape Resolutions for the New Year

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Now is the time for New Year resolutions. Since it is estimated homeowners use about twice as much water in their landscapes as needed, here are a few resolutions to help conserve water.

Resolve to turn off automatic irrigation systems and only turn them on when the soil is dry or the turf shows signs of needing water. This not only conserves drinking water we are using to irrigate plants but reduces wear and tear on community water infrastructure.

It will be better for the lawn and landscape trees. When irrigation systems are run continuously, the upper few inches of soil can remain too wet. This is an unhealthy environment for roots. Wet soils lead to root death, root diseases and limits gas exchange between air and soil. Roots do not function well without soil oxygen.

Frequently running an irrigation system for brief periods leads to shallow irrigation. Absorbing tree roots are in the upper 8 to 10 inches of soil. With our drought, deeper soil profiles are dry. Trees growing in lawns irrigated only by short periods of irrigation are stressed. And drought effects trees long after the drought ends.

If you wish to learn more about efficient irrigation, contact me at kfeehan2@unl.edu to ask us about our Water Dogs program. We can help you better understand turfgrass water needs and efficient irrigation practices, and teach you how to do an irrigation system audit. We also have Zoom classes to watch.

Another water conserving resolution is to select landscape plants that are not water hogs. This does not mean established plants should be removed. New plants require frequent irrigation to establish, even those that are drought tolerant. When selecting new plants, think low water use and diverse. Avoid plants that are overplanted.

Some trees considered drought tolerant once established include black Cherry, honey locust, Kentucky coffee tree, oaks such as red, bur and chinkapin, Ohio buckeye and sycamore. For smaller trees, Amelanchier, Hawthorn, and American hornbeam are decent choices.

There are many low water use shrubs. A favorite are Viburnums. While not all are drought tolerant, 'Judd', blackhaw, 'Mohican' and arrowwood are considered low water users. Others include 'Pawnee Buttes' Western sand cherry, Caryopteris, fragrant Sumac, ninebark, mockorange and creeping cotoneaster.

There are many water-wise perennials if planted in the right locations and watered correctly until roots establish. For a Nebraska list, go to <https://go.unl.edu/waterwiseperennials>. And don't overlook native grasses like little bluestem and prairie drop seed.

We are often asked if there is a turfgrass that requires less irrigation than Kentucky bluegrass (KBG). Buffalograss, once established, will get by with very little to no irrigation or mowing. However, due to its grayish green color, it has not become popular. There are some improved cultivars though.

Turf-type tall fescue has the characteristics desired for home landscapes. Due to its deep root system, it requires much less frequent irrigation than KBG. And while it is often planted, it tends to be watered the same as KBG. This is a major waste of water. Turn off the irrigation system and only water as needed.

And last but very important, make a resolution to better manage soil. It is the foundation of healthy plant growth but often forgotten. The best time to improve soil, such as incorporating organic matter, is before planting. Taking this extra step with new landscapes and gardens will more than pay for itself. On established sites, avoiding overwatering and overfertilizing will lead to a healthier soil.