

Reducing Lawn Irrigation

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During hot, dry weather communities often ask homeowners to reduce lawn irrigation. This is usually a good thing that leads to water conservation and healthier turfgrass.

Many lawns with automatic irrigation systems are overwatered. This wastes water and leads to unhealthy root systems. Reducing lawn irrigation may be a good idea every year for many lawns.

Water is essential for all plants. Soil oxygen is also essential for healthy roots. When soils are overwatered, soil oxygen levels are reduced leading to root loss or reduced root function. Too wet of soil also lead to root rots.

I've had people tell me if they don't water their lawn every day the turf begins to wilt or turn brown. In such cases, it is likely the roots are so unhealthy or sparse the sod has to be watered frequently, like brand new sod.

Turfgrass specialists recommend a wilt-based approach to lawn watering. This means turning irrigation systems off and only using them when water is needed.

The simplest method for determining when a lawn needs water is watching for signs of moisture stress. These include grass turning blue-gray or grayish-green in color and footprints remaining in the lawn after walking across it.

Another method is by digging into the soil with a knife or soil probe. Irrigate if the soil is dry to two to three inches deep since much of a grass plant's root system is located in the upper four inches of soil.

When these signs of moisture stress appear, or the upper few inches become dry, it's time to turn the irrigation system on and water thoroughly.

A thorough irrigation once or twice a week is best. How often and how long to run the system depends on soil type, the system itself, weather and water pressure.

It is recommended to irrigate until the soil is moistened well about four to six inches deep; then do not irrigate again until the lawn shows the first signs of water stress.

This wilt-based approach increases rooting depth and conserves water. Daily watering is not recommended for lawns as it leads to thatch, shallow rooting, diseases, weeds and turf yellowing.

Communities may also ask homeowners to irrigate their lawns in the evenings instead of during the morning during peak water use time.

While early morning watering is recommended as a rule, it is fine to water in the evenings. Avoid watering during the hottest part of the day when it is also the windiest. As much as 50 percent of water applied during midday irrigation can be lost to evaporation without ever reaching the ground.

The main reason we recommend early morning irrigation, as a rule, is because evening irrigation can increase the risk of disease.

This risk is fairly low and the importance of conserving community water and decreasing wear and tear on infrastructure outweighs the disease risk during hot, dry weather.

Most of the foliar diseases promoted by evening watering are fairly minor. For home lawns, we often do not even recommend applying a fungicide for these diseases. Most lawns will grow out of the damage.