

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

Acreage eNews-October 2013

<http://acreage.unl.edu>

Warm Autumn Weather, and Watering Plants

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When warm October days occur, we may enjoy these last vestiges of summer, but some landscape plants could become drought stressed. In the absence of rain, fall watering is very important in helping plants recover from summer stresses and tolerate winter stresses.

Turfgrass Water Needs

During fall, cool season turfgrasses like Kentucky bluegrass and tall fescue are actively growing. While leafy growth decreases and eventually stops with cooler temperature, root and rhizome growth can continue up until soil temperatures drop below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, which may be well into November.

Adequate soil moisture is especially important in supporting root and rhizome growth during fall. This helps lawns recover from summer heat stress, disease or insect damage, and increases the density and vigor of turfgrass so they better compete with weeds now and next spring.

If we have a dry winter, fall applied moisture is of greater benefit in reducing injury from winter drying. Because plant roots do not take up moisture when soil temperatures are close to or below freezing, moisture received from rain or snow during winter is not as beneficial as fall supplied moisture.

Trees, Shrubs, and Ornamentals

Fall irrigation of trees and shrubs, especially evergreens and young trees, is just as important to promoting root growth and reducing winter drying. Keep in mind the finer, hair-like roots of most plants are continually dying and re-growing, and need moisture throughout the season.

If needed, in the absence of rain, continue to water trees and shrubs until close to soil freeze. Water when air temperatures are above 40 degrees Fahrenheit and early in the day. This allows water to soak into the ground and avoids water freezing on the surface at night which could damage plants.

For trees, shrubs and roses moisten the soil about eight inches deep. Before watering, check soil moisture to determine the need to water and to avoid saturated soil conditions. Roots will not grow in an anaerobic soil that lacks oxygen. If roots are not functioning or growing because of too wet of soil, plants can still become drought stressed and roots can be infected by root rots.

While herbaceous perennials, plants whose tops die back each winter, also require adequate moisture through the fall, it is critical not to overwater perennials. A wet soil during winter is a common killer of many perennials and leads to crown or root rots. A moist, but well-drained soil is needed by most perennials.