

Sometimes Too Much Water is the Problem

Published 6/29/20 – Picture of leaf scorch due to waterlogged soil and compromised root system.

Water is an obvious necessity not only for plants but all life on earth. It's so important to us that one of the first things scientists check for on a new celestial body is the existence of water. But from my experience, the majority of plant failures are from too much or too little water.



The usual challenge for new indoor plants is too much water. If the plant looks a little out of sorts, the natural tendency for almost everyone is to give it a drink. That definitely isn't always the cure. For almost every plant it's best to err on the side of too dry. It's also best to check the pots your houseplants are in and make sure they have drain holes in their base. A fair percentage of houseplants come from funerals and for cleanliness needs at churches and funeral homes come in pots with no drainage or pots that do drain but are placed inside wicker baskets lined with plastic. Either holes have to be made or the plants removed from the wicker baskets for watering and put back in once they stop draining.

The usual challenge for new outdoor plants is not enough water. I always find it fascinating when walking public land in west river where the operative word is "arid," that right where a homestead once stood is a grouping of 100+ year old trees. Those trees didn't happen by accident. They were coddled by the homesteaders, maybe even watered by bucket on a daily basis. The dedication to keep those trees going year after year through our usual hot, dry summers impresses me. But sometimes too much water is the problem.

Last year was an epic year for continued moisture from beginning to end. Hillsides stayed green, fields flooded, and rivers broke their banks throughout much of the state. Water tables also rose. Water tables are the top of a zone in the ground below which water has saturated the dirt. Water tables are a good thing to get to if you're the roots of a thirsty plant. But if roots are already present at a particular level and the water tables rises above that level, the roots start drowning and can eventually die. That seems to have happened quite a bit last year.

Without enough roots, trees and shrubs have a hard time bringing up enough water that the plant needs. This puts the plant into stress which allows infections and insect infestations easier times to gain foot holds in and on the plant. For our long needled pines that has resulted in fungal infections as presented in this column in early May. The lack of enough roots also has the effect of lowering the threshold temperature where environmental challenges like excessive heat and drying winds negatively affect the plants. Heat scorch appears when the plant loses water through transpiration quicker than it's ability to replace that water. Scorched leaves first show damage at their tips and the worse it is the farther back the damage goes to the point of entire leaves browning, shriveling, and dropping. For trees that lost roots because of rising water tables, scorch can happen when the daytime temps reach what we consider to be warm but not excessively hot.

It's impractical to try to lower water tables so much of the homeowner's reaction is to hope for the best, mulch around the plant if that hasn't already been done, and water when needed. Always check a couple of inches into the ground to feel for dampness. If it's damp, no need to water, and if you do water, mornings are better than evenings. So yeah, sometimes too much water is the problem!

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