

Watering Trees And Shrubs

Published 6/4/19 – Public domain image titled “Monkey Watering Dead Plants” by William Hogarth, 1764, from New York Public Library, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>

So last week we talked about how we live in what's a native grassland and that if we want trees and shrubs to live we must give them more water than just what comes from the sky . . . or our lawn sprinkler systems, they cannot adequately water deeply as trees and shrubs need. So to start, what should we be aware of when we water our landscapes?

There are 3 distinct watering periods we can define for trees and shrubs. First is when they're planted. They need water immediately, then perhaps a couple to several times per week for at least a couple of weeks. Frequency of waterings depends on the moisture level of the native soil, weather conditions such as wind, clouds, and temperatures, how quickly the soil drains, and the size and type of the plant.

The second period is the first couple of years after planting when the plants are developing root systems but have not yet become fully established. After the initial first couple of weeks this is the most important period for watering as it's only during this period when deep and thorough waterings allow the plants to develop deep, healthy root systems. Lawn irrigation systems cannot do this job. To check if your trees and shrubs need water, push your finger down about 2" and feel for moisture. For most species of plants, if it's dry, water, if it's wet, wait. There are several varieties of trees and shrubs that fall outside this rule, but that's a story for a different day.

It doesn't matter how the water gets to the roots, whether it's by a slow drip hose, soaker hose, drip irrigation system, hose sprinkler, specially designed tree water bags, or 5-gallon buckets with holes drilled in the side near the bottom. What matters is that enough gets to the roots. A good rule of thumb for the amount of water given to a plant is for every 1" of trunk diameter 12" off the ground, give 1-1.5" of water. So a 4" diameter tree will need 4-6" of water each watering. Circular rings of dirt around the plants force the water to soak over the roots; for not yet established plants the ring should be as wide or wider than the outside of the canopy. As the plants grows, the ring should grow as well. Mulch is extremely beneficial at not only greatly reducing the amount of soil surface evaporation but in helping maintain consistent soil moisture levels.

But even established trees may suffer during our hot, dry summers. Sometimes it's hard to remember to water established plants during these times of stress, but the better shape plants come out of summer means better health going into fall and preparing for winter. If watering established plants when it's hot is too much to deal with maybe drought-tolerant species are the only ones to plant. More on these later this summer.

And if you've read this far, perhaps you've picked up on the theme of this article, which is do not rely on lawn sprinkler systems to adequately water trees and shrubs!

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