

GARDEN COLUMN FOR THE SALISBURY POST

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It's impossible to predict how much moisture will be available during the summer. With the current situation, memories of the drought in 2001 are still vivid. Conditions over the past couple of weeks mimic desert conditions; warm dry days and cool nights. These conditions are taking a toll on newly planted plant materials and lawns. Many have inquired about irrigating and there is really no cookbook answer to just how much water a plant needs during this unusual weather.

Newly planted bedding plants, trees and shrubs need careful attention during the next few weeks. Clay soils hold quite a bit of moisture so daily irrigation is not recommended. Water deeply once or twice a week to prevent moisture stress. A good way to determine if plants are suffering is if the plants are wilted in early morning. Most newly planted plants are wilting from heat, not lack of water. Those suffering from heat stress will be turgid and erect in the early morning. If these plants are wilted, then they probably need water. Over-watering will also cause plants to wilt; turn yellow and will eventually die from oxygen deprivation. Check soil closely if you are irrigating and the plants are still wilting.

Cool season turf such as fescue and bluegrass go semi-dormant during hot weather (temperatures constantly above 85 degrees F). The grass turns brown and shuts-down growth until cool weather or consistent rain occurs. These always turn brown first during the summer, yet when

cooler temperatures arrive in the fall, the medians turn green again. Cool season turf can sustain life for weeks without water. However, if droughts are consistent, the turf will eventually die. Cool season turf should be irrigated every 2-3 weeks during extended droughts. This conserves water and extends the life of the turf.

Homeowners should strive for maximum growth during the fall and early spring to aid in survivability. Fescue has a deep root system allowing the plant to survive long sustained droughts. Seeding lawns in the fall provides turf with optimum growing conditions. Lawns should be fertilized properly in the fall and spring to aid in growth. Weed control is another cultural practice which enables plants to achieve optimum growth.

Mowing turf high eliminates stress on cool season lawns during hot dry weather. Mowing too close reduces survival of cool season turf. Turf-type fescue and other cool season grasses should be mowed to a height of 3 1/2 to 4 inches.

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