

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

Darrell Blackwelder

June 9, 2008

Those with large potted plants and container plants must water day just to keep them alive in this unusually hot, dry weather experienced over the past few days. Lack of rain and low humidity can be a challenge for those that garden.

Even with spotty rains, irrigation is a way of life for those that want to keep bedding plants, lawns and vegetable alive. The ideal time to irrigate is in the early morning, avoiding evaporation during the heat of the day. Avoid irrigating late in the afternoon or at night. Even though late evening and night irrigation provides cooler temperatures, it also the perfect environment for foliar diseases to develop. Use a coffee can or similar vessel and a ruler as a measuring device to measure the amount used if you use overhead irrigation. Shallow irrigation can be of no real benefit and may cause more damage with creating shallow root systems. Check the soil often to make sure plants are receiving an adequate water supply. If you have a drip system, place a small plastic cup beneath the hose to measure the amounts from drip emitters.

Automatic timers ease the task of irrigation and reduce waste by eliminating over watering. Water timers meter water by gallons or by amount of irrigation time desired by owner. There is really no way to tell a person how much to water a plant a week. Plant species, soil types, exposures are only a few variables, which exist, that confuse even the most experienced gardener. Obviously, newly planted shrubs and trees may need more water than well-established trees and shrubs. Dogwoods, rhododendron, azaleas, and camellias have shallow root systems, easily drying out in this type of weather and may need extra water.

Remember, do not over water these shrubs, as over watering kills trees and shrubs much quicker than droughts. Shrubs such

hydrangeas wilt during the heat of the day but become turgid in the evening and early in the morning. Therefore, close examination early in the morning is the best time to gauge when to irrigate. Mulching is one of the cheapest and most effective methods of water conservation. Three or more inches of organic mulches such as bark or pine needles conserve soil moisture. Wheat straw, shredded newspaper and other organic material should also be used in vegetable gardens as an aid in conserving moisture, especially around tomato plants and other plants that are heavy drinkers.

Darrell Blackwelder is an agricultural agent in charge of horticulture with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in Rowan County.