

Proper Watering of Yards and Gardens

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The weather got hot and dry quickly this year, with parched conditions starting in early June. According to Purdue University and the National Weather Service, we may actually be in a full-fledged drought by August.

As a rule of thumb, the majority of the trees, shrubs, flowers, and vegetables we plant in southern Indiana require the equivalent of one inch of rain every week for optimal growth. If we don't get this amount of rain, we need to replace it with some form of irrigation.

Sprinklers, whether movable or the in-ground type, should be run very early in the morning. There is less evaporation from heat and sun, and less wind to blow the water into the street. The foliage will dry quickly once the sun rises, so there's much less likelihood of disease problems than if you water in the evening. Place a few rain gauges or jars with straight sides to capture the irrigation water, and measure the amount of water you catch. After you catch one inch, shut it off...that's all you need for the week. One heavy soaking per week is much better for the yard than multiple light sprinklings.

If you use soaker hoses in flower and vegetable gardens, it doesn't matter what time of day you do it, because you're not getting the leaves wet. Your goal is to make sure the moisture moves 6 to 8 inches deep, where most of your roots are. Depending on your soaker hose or other drip irrigation system, this may take up to 3 or 4 hours. The only way to know is to turn it on, and every hour or so, dig downwards next to the hose to see how deep the moisture has reached.

Watering by hand is very inefficient. Most people do not add anywhere near enough water to help their plants. To achieve the equivalent of 1 inch of rain, you need to provide slightly more than one-half gallon of water per square foot.

Multiply the length of the garden by its width to get the total square feet, then divide that number by half to figure out how many gallons to apply. If you have a bed 5 feet wide and 10 feet long, that's 50 square feet, so you'd need 25 gallons of water. Time how long it takes your hose to fill a 5 gallon bucket (let's say 3 minutes). You'd need to do that 5 times to adequately water your bed; if you get done in less than 15 minutes, you are not watering enough! As with the sprinkler, either do this early in the morning to reduce disease problems, or be careful not to get the leaves wet.

Next week, we'll talk about how inexpensive it is to irrigate your yard, compared with ripping it out and starting over. And don't forget the Mushroom Foray this Friday evening at Wesselman Woods Nature Preserve!