

Efficient Watering of Gardens and Yards

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For the last two weeks, I've been talking about irrigating your yard and garden. We've learned that we need to apply the equivalent of 1 inch of rain per week, which equals one-half gallon of water per square foot. We've also covered the needs of trees, and that to adequately irrigate a tree, we basically need to water our yard, and probably the neighbor's yard, too.

This week, I'd like to talk about being efficient with our irrigation, so that we don't waste water.

When designing your landscape, group plants with similar needs. Those that can tolerate dry soils, like sedum, should be placed in beds separated from thirsty annuals. That way, you can irrigate what needs to be irrigated, and skip those that don't.

Water early in the morning, when the temperatures are cooler and there's less evaporation. There also tends to be less wind early in the morning, so if you are using a sprinkler, the water won't be blown off-target. Also, the leaves will dry off quickly as the sun rises, and the faster the leaves dry off, the less disease problems you'll experience.

When setting up a sprinkler, watch it run for a while to see where the water is going. Some of the fancier oscillating (back and forth) sprinklers can be adjusted in different ways, so that you can control the width of the water stream, and the range that sprinkler throws the water. This prevents throwing water on the side of the house or down the driveway.

In-ground sprinkler systems are convenient, but need frequent fine-tuning. The pop-up sprinkler heads are easily knocked out of alignment by lawn equipment or kids. This often leads to improper water distribution: some areas will get too much, while nearby spots won't get enough. One of the biggest problems with pop-up sprinklers along sidewalks is when they water the concrete, and not the lawn.

By the way, if you use a timer on your sprinkler system, please use it intelligently. If it's been dry for the past week, and there's no rain in sight, go ahead and set your timer to turn on at 6 tomorrow morning (unless you want to be up that early to turn the sprinklers on and off). But I really hate to see properties with a sprinkler that comes automatically every Wednesday...even during a rain storm.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, it's much better to water heavily once per week, rather than lightly several times per week. With a heavy soaking, moisture can move down deeply into the soil, and the roots will follow it down. With frequent light waterings, all you're doing is wetting the dust, encouraging shallow rooting, and allowing the deeper roots to die of thirst. Frequent light irrigation also encourages thatch buildup in the lawn.

For more information on irrigation, please contact the Purdue Extension Service at 812-435-5287.