Watering for Winter

It’s been a dry fall and our landscapes are begging for rain. Giving your plants a good drink of water before winter sets in will help alleviate stress. We have seen many trees with environmental stress from our Kansas weather conditions. One of the best ways to protect your trees and other landscape plants is to make sure they have the proper amount of moisture.

We may not think about it, but plants continue to use water during the winter, although not as much. The freezing and thawing cycles also remove moisture from the soil. Also, don't forget about the effects of drying winds that pull moisture from the soil. Bottom line, soils are often on the dry side in winter. Plants that are well hydrated will survive winter conditions and be stronger and more established come spring and throughout the rest of summer.

Winter watering tips are pretty simple. You are free to water any time during the winter as long as the soil is not frozen and temperatures are above freezing when applying. It does not matter if the temps fall below freezing after the application as frozen water in the soil will not harm the plants.

A good, deep watering with moisture reaching at least a foot down into the soil is much better than several light sprinklings that just wet the top portions of the soil. A deep watering will help ensure that the majority of roots have access to water. Regardless of the watering method used, soil should be wet at least 12 inches deep. To check how deep you are watering, push a rod (rebar, electric fence post, wooden dowel) into wet the soil. When the rod stops, you have hit dry ground.

Although all perennial plants benefit from moist soils before winter, it is especially important for newly planted trees and shrubs due to limited root systems. Even trees and shrubs planted within the last 2 to 3 years are more sensitive to drought than a well-established plant. Evergreens are also more at risk because moisture is lost from the foliage through the winter.

Trees or shrubs planted within the last year can be watered inexpensively with a 5-gallon bucket. Drill a small hole (1/8”) in the side of the bucket near the bottom. Fill the bucket and let
the water dribble out slowly next to the tree. Once empty, move the bucket to the other side of the tree. Refill the bucket once more, and you have applied 10 gallons. Very large transplanted trees and trees that were transplanted two to three years ago will require more water.

A lawn sprinkler system is not meant to water trees and shrubs. Most irrigation systems water very shallow, only soaking the upper 4 inches of the soil. Tree and shrub roots, while at the surface, are also deeper in the soil, so additional water must be applied to help ensure they survive dry periods.

A perforated soaker hose is a good way to water a newly established bed or foundation plantings. However, soaker hoses are notorious for non-uniform watering. In other words, you often receive too much water from one part of the hose and not enough from another. Hooking both the beginning and the end of the soaker hose to a Y-adapter helps equalize the pressure and therefore provides a more uniform watering. It is also helpful if the Y-adapter has shut off valves so the volume of flow can be controlled. Too high a flow rate can allow water to run off rather than soak in.

Make sure to give your landscape plants a drink this winter to keep them healthy and growing in spring. If you have any questions on watering your trees, contact your local K-State Extension Office.

*Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at choman@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).*