

## **Post Rock Answers**

**By Cassie Thiessen October 28, 2022**

**Post Rock Extension District Horticulture Agent**

### **Watering for Winter**

It's been a dry fall and our landscapes are begging for rain. We've seen many trees with environmental stress from this year's prolonged dry 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. Giving your plants a good drink of water before winter sets in will help alleviate stress.

We may not think about it, but plants continue to use water during the winter, although not as much as the warmer months. The freezing and thawing cycles remove moisture from the soil and dry winter winds can also leach needed moisture. Bottom line: soils are often on the dry side in the 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. Water can be applied to landscape plants any time the temperature is above freezing and the soil is not frozen so that it can soak into the ground. Once the water is applied, the temperatures can drop below freezing and there will be no harm to the plants. Although most outside faucets have a drain to prevent freezing, for safety reasons, it is best to remove the hose from the faucet and completely drain the hose and sprinkler once the water is applied.

A deep watering will help ensure the majority of roots have access to water. 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. 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. Remember: you want moisture reaching down at least 12 inches.

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 visible 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. 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 of a flow rate can allow water to run off rather than soak in.

Make sure to give your landscape plants a drink this fall and 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 [c Thiessen@ksu.edu](mailto:c Thiessen@ksu.edu) or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).*