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Things have certainly turned around here of late and we are certainly experiencing some dry weather. Here are a few tips that may help deal with the dry weather in your lawns and gardens. First of all, make sure that you do a good job of weed control around your landscape and gardens. Weeds compete with other plants for not only nutrients but water as well. One of the best and cheapest ways to help your plants through dry weather is by mulching. A layer of mulch will help hold moisture in the soil and will help to make your watering efforts more efficient. The mulch will also help to moderate the soil temperature around your plant's roots and can help prevent crusting of the soil's surface. There are many types of mulches from which to choose. In areas that require a less formal appearance, pine straw works as well as anything. There are also shredded bark, bark nuggets, and others that give a more formal appearance.

Water is a vital resource and must be used sparingly. Timing of your watering is very important. The best time of day to water is very early in the morning. Watering in the morning will avoid losing much of the water to evaporation that occurs when you water later in the day. Irrigating during the heat of the day can waste as much as 65% of the water due to evaporation. Avoid watering late in the evening especially with overhead sprinklers or irrigation. Late evening watering can lead to fungal disease problems. Slow deep watering is also much better than frequent light watering. Many of us tend to get in a hurry and water our plants quickly and fairly often. This type of watering forces your plants to develop a very shallow root system and actually makes them more susceptible to drought stress.

If you are lucky enough to have a watering system, check the location of your sprinklers or the direction of the nozzles on your in-ground system. This can help you prevent wasting water by irrigating things that do not need irrigating such as sidewalks, streets, decks and patios. Remember, the less water you waste the more that goes on your plants and the lower your water bill will be.

Keep in mind that most plants need about one inch of rainfall per week. If you do not know how much you are watering, try placing a small pan or container in the area you are irrigating and when the depth of the water in the pan reaches one inch then you have watered enough. A better plan is to apply ½ the water and let it soak in for a little while then apply the remaining water.

For garden use and around in flower beds, soaker hoses are a very efficient method of applying water. The soaker hoses allow water to slowly drip around your plants thus the water reaches deeper into the soil instead of running off. You may even apply mulch directly over the top of your soaker hose. You should also limit the amount of fertilizer that you use during dry periods unless you have a system for watering your plants. Applying fertilizer to plants that are already drought stressed does them no good and may even severely burn your plants.

Generally speaking, in your home garden if your tomatoes are growing well, the remaining vegetables are also getting enough water. The most critical time for most garden vegetables is at flowering and during fruit set. Too little water during these critical periods can cause loss of production as well as dwarfing of the fruit. The condition called blossom end rot, common in tomatoes, peppers, watermelons, and other vegetables is worse in years such as this when we started out with adequate moisture and then turned dry. Here is one additional thought about irrigating in the vegetable garden. When the fruit begins to ripen, you can cut back slightly on your watering as overwatering the ripening fruit can reduce its sugar content and reduce its quality.

Turfgrasses can also suffer from drought stress as those of us not fortunate to have irrigation systems are well aware. Fortunately many of the lawns in our area are warm season perennial grasses such as bermudagrass, zoysia, or centipede. Warm season grasses will certainly show stress during dry weather and may slow their growth or even brown out during severe dry conditions. This browning out or dormant period is usually only temporary and the grasses usually green back up as soon as the rain starts or else you break down and use some irrigation. This is not true for cool season perennial grasses such as fescue. Fescue can be severely damaged or thinned by periods of hot dry weather. If you have fescue lawns or are considering fescue as a turfgrass, you probably should consider an irrigation system. Newly seeded, sodded, or sprigged grasses will need to be watered at least through their first year until they get a good deep root system established.

You should also utilize the “cutback” plan for your lawn during prolonged dry periods. That is to say...cutback on the traffic, cutback on the fertilizer, and cutback on the mowing. Drought stressed grass cannot tolerate a lot of wear and tear and can be further damaged by excessive fertilizer. If you irrigate apply a little more water in areas where trees or shrubs are growing as they will take up a lot of the water, and water the upper part of slopes more than lower parts since water moves downhill.

Supplemental watering for trees and shrubs is also important, especially if you decide not to provide irrigation for your entire lawn. This is especially true of newly established trees, shrubs, and landscape plants. Trees and shrubs that have been established less than one year will need plenty of extra water all the way through their first growing season. Again, slow deep watering along with a light layer of mulch will help keep your shrubs and trees healthy during drought conditions.

It is my hope that by the time you read this we will have gotten some rainfall that we have been promised that was moving into our area. Rest assured, however, that as the summer progresses we will probably be in store for more hot dry weather.