

WaterWatch



Take the Guesswork Out of Lawn Watering

As summer wanes you probably are faced with two problems — a dead landscape or a large water bill. Now is a good time to start thinking about how much water you really need.

The main problem with helping people with their watering problems is that there are so many different variables — plants, watering systems, sprinklers and soil types, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. All of these factors play a part in determining the correct watering practices.

How long do I leave my sprinkler system on?

The answer is simple, he says. Leave the system on long enough to thoroughly water the plants and recharge the moisture level in the root zone. In other words, give the plants enough water to thrive, but not so much that their roots rot or drown. Finding this watering rate for your individual yard is more difficult.

“Most people just guess when it comes to watering,” Goodspeed says. “They seldom take the time to find out exactly what the water is doing in their soil, or how long it is staying in the root zone of the

plants. Don't take my word for it or anyone else's. You can and should figure out how long your system should water.”

It is easier to determine how long and how often to run the sprinklers if you understand a little about the system, the soil and your plants, he explains. The first thing to do is become more knowledgeable about your soil. Is it draining efficiently, and how well does it hold water?



Dig a hole about a foot deep in the backyard, and fill it with water, he says. If it drains within an hour, it is probably a sandy-type soil with a limited water-holding capacity. If it takes two to three hours to drain it contains some clay, but still has adequate drainage. If the water is

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Inspecting Stormwater Facilities

Most business and non-single family residential properties in Orem have stormwater facilities on their sites. These facilities range from catch basins and sumps to detention basins.

All stormwater facilities should be inspected regularly. Several times each week, property owners or managers should look at their storm drains for evidence of dumping. Common problems include dumping of paints and other construction materials, dumping of petroleum products and dumping of food wastes.

At least annually you should take the lids or grates off of your facilities to check for build up of sediments and other debris.

If a stormwater facility has a bad odor, has evidence of dumping or is approaching 40% full of sediment, it should be cleaned. Also, if you notice that a facility does not drain for several days after a storm event, it may be time to clean it out.

You can contact an environmental contractor listed in the yellow pages to help you clean out your stormwater facility. For small catch basins, you may be able to take care of the cleaning yourself with a shovel.

If you wouldn't drink it, don't dump it!

City of Orem Public Works
955 N 900 West
Orem, UT 84057

Phone: 801-229-7500
Fax: 801-229-7599

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Salt

Recently I was asked to investigate a case of a white powdery residue in a gutter. This substance turned out to be brine residue from a family's water softener unit. This led me to ask two questions: 1) Is rock salt harmful to stormwater facilities? And 2) What should a person do with salty water from a water softener if they choose to dispose of it?

First, salt is a relatively harmless substance and nearly all water has traces of salt in it. But obviously, Utah Lake isn't the Great Salt Lake or the ocean. Too much salt can be a concern to the environment. In high concentrations, salt can kill off vegetation as well as freshwater aquatic life.

So what should you do with the brine from a water softener unit? Generally speaking it will not be necessary to clean out a properly functioning water softener brine tank. If it does become necessary, have a professional repair person handle the process.

Lawn Watering

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still there the next morning, the soil is either a clay-type or you have a hard-pan.

"If the hole has more water by the next morning, call for help because you have either hit a water main or your realtor sold you swamp land," Goodspeed says.

How does this help in determining when to water?

A sandy, well-drained soil can be watered more frequently without damaging the roots, he says. A poor-draining, heavy soil holds the water and should be watered less often. For example, in the heat of the summer, plants in a typical sandy soil need watering every three or four days, where the same plants in a clay-type soil can go five or even six days between irrigations.

Another method for calculating water requirements is to dig into the soil before watering, he adds. Insert a spade or shovel into the soil about four inches, then feel the soil. If it is still moist to the touch or wet, shallow-rooted plants will probably be fine. If it is dry at a depth of four inches, it may be time to water again. Most annuals, grasses and perennials have roots that grow six to eight inches into the soil, and trees and shrubs are usually even deeper.



"After watering, go out and dig around in the yard to see how long it

takes before the top four inches of soil are dry," Goodspeed says. "Once it starts to dry, water again. This can tell you how often to water."

Now to answer the question of how long to let the sprinklers run. The majority of the plants in our landscapes have roots that extend about eight inches into the soil, he says. So, it is logical to water until it has penetrated at least eight inches into the soil. This is easy to figure out.

"Take a rod or screwdriver that is at least eight inches long, and poke it into the soil after watering," he says. "It will slide right through soil that is moist. Once it hits dry ground it will stop and become harder to push. Pull the rod out and measure it to see how deep the water is penetrating."

Of course deeper-rooted trees and shrubs require some water at a depth greater than eight inches, he adds. Ensuring that the moisture moves to this level in the soil profile can take time. You may need to use a hose with a slow dribble of water at the base of the tree to make sure the water reaches the lower roots.

"The real trick to watering is simply knowing how deep the water is going into the soil and how long it is staying there," Goodspeed says. "Don't guess or be afraid to go out to probe or dig around until you know more about what is happening in the yard."

By Dennis Hinkamp

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