

Prima Plant Services, Inc.

Landscape Health Care Specialists

90 Arlian Road Carbondale, Co. 81623
Phone / FAX (970) 963-6113
office@primaplantservices.com

Be Water Smart

Resource managers, water departments, and turf / landscape Extension agents throughout the west are in agreement that people need to change their mindset about proper watering. **We must think in terms of watering the SOIL where the roots are located and the deeper the better!** Unfortunately, many folks operate their irrigation systems making the same errors year after year by watering for short periods of time (10 – 20 minutes per cycle) and every day or every other day.

How do we change our watering mindset? First, **you must know how much water your sprinklers put out in a given amount of time.** In several areas of your landscape, measure the output of your system by setting out containers such as tuna or cat food cans (or Prima will gladly give you some nifty yellow measuring cups – please ask!) Run your sprinkler for a “normal” cycle (even for hose-end type sprinklers). You might be amazed at how little water you collect when you measure the amount with a ruler. What you are shooting for is 1 inch – this should moisten the top 6-8 inches of soil (dig in your spade and see how deep the moisture has traveled). The idea is simple – **deep moisture availability will train the roots to go deeper. The deeper the better!** On hot, dry afternoons the top inch or two of soil bakes in the sun. If your plants’ roots are shallow and limited to this “cook zone”, they really struggle (i.e. look and perform poorly).

So, once you have measured your “normal” amount of watering, you might see that it amounts to a scant 1/8 or 1/4 inch in some or all areas of your landscape. **Consistent short-cycle watering is not doing your wallet or your landscape any good.** Adjust the timer of your irrigation controller to water longer until get you to the desired 1 inch.

TURF: After you know how long your sprinklers need to run to provide 1 inch of water, your next job (and this is the hardest part for most folks) is to **wait between waterings until your lawn (or garden) tells you to water again.** Look for graying in color and for the grass to not spring back when walked upon. At first this might be on the second or third day. Water again **deeply**, and then wait. Chances are after a few such deep watering cycles, you can eventually wait 4, 5, 6 or more days between waterings! Now you are WATERING WISELY! (**Water at night or early morning when the wind and sun are not immediately evaporating the water.**)

TREES AND SHRUBS: Contrary to what many of us learned as kids, tree roots don’t look like carrots. **Absorbing roots spread way out, far beyond the width of the foliage canopy.** We must also remember that grass and other plantings compete with trees for water.

It is so sad when trees suffer from improper watering. It can take years to recover (if they ever do). Aside from short, shallow watering cycles, **another culprit I often see is improper placement of irrigation heads, whether they are sprays, bubblers or micro-sprays.** When a landscape is new, the installer places one or two bubblers or micro-sprays on top of the root ball next to the trunk. It keeps the tree alive at first because all of the roots are in that small root ball. But two or three seasons later, the roots have grown outward perhaps several feet and the crown has also enlarged respectively. These **larger plants need more water to thrive (think of the needs of a toddler compared to the needs of a teenager!)**

As the tree reaches its limits of water availability it starts to suffer. Drought stress causes dieback of branches and premature loss of needles or leaves. The tree is also far more susceptible to a host of insect or disease problems. **Think how much money a replacement tree would cost. Proper watering is far more cost effective!**

Sometimes a major overhaul is required – adding many heads over many more square feet of the root zone. In the case of spray heads, **sometimes the spray pattern might overshoot the root zone or has become blocked by maturing perennials, shrubs or other trees.** Changing out head types or adjusting spray radii might easily help the situation. A word of caution – few irrigators have a broad understanding of the “horticulture” of your landscape. Please insist on proper coverage for the type and maturity of your landscape.

Other important factors to consider for the best water utilization and turf / tree health:

Core aeration at least once per year – spring or fall, do when the soil is moist to get a full 2” plug. If your soil is heavy or compacted, rake compost onto the turf after aeration to add organic matter into the plug holes. This helps hold moisture in the turf root zone.

Sacrifice difficult water using areas or convert to a less thirsty Xeriscape theme.

Adequately mulch your trees and shrubs – 3 to 4 inches of shredded bark or wood chips will insulate the root zones and will greatly lessen evaporation. (Keep mulch away from the trunk.)

Mow high – minimum 2 ½ to 3 inches tall provides more shade to turf crowns and encourages deeper root growth. Ask us for one of our mow height measurement tools.

Fertilize less – no more than twice per season, and only ½ pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of turf per application. Slow release nitrogen gives steady, longer-term growth, not a fast flush of growth followed by a quick decline. (Prima Plant Services follows these fertilization practices).

What do I practice? - At my house in El Jebel I have turf, perennial beds and vegetable gardens watered by a manual underground sprinkler system (not run on an automatic timer) which feeds from a ditch. I can use the ditch only once per week. I turn on each zone for a minimum of 1 hour to get 1 inch. I irrigate when the sun is low and the wind is fairly calm (refrain from the hot hours 10am to 6pm.) Hand watering of new plantings (trees, perennials or annuals) is necessary between cycles, but the turf and the mature trees do great with this program.