Drought is No Time for High Maintenance Plants

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Even though you may not want to worry about spring drought in March, it is a good time to think about the possibility of future water restrictions and what you can do now to help your landscape survive despite less water. The best change you could make now is to stop trying to keep up a high maintenance landscape. Thirsty lawns and plants create problems during a drought, especially when we must abide by water restrictions. Plant less thirsty plants and they will do better and you will save money on your water bill. During the past few years we’ve experienced severe drought beginning in late spring. You can make your yard more drought tolerant this year using some of these techniques.

1. Group plants by water usage in your landscape. Put plants that need more water together in one plant bed and those that tolerate drought in another plant bed in a separate area. Use drip or low-volume irrigation to get the water lovers through the drought. Drought tolerant plants, once established, should be able to survive without additional watering. Creating plant beds makes tending plants easier. Mowing around one big bed is quicker and easier than mowing around many small plants. And you can mulch the entire area to keep out weeds. Beds are aesthetically pleasing also because they tie separate landscape elements together.

2. Raise your mower blade to let lawngrass grow taller; it will grow deeper roots and be able to withstand longer periods without water. For more, see UF/IFAS publication: ENH157 Managing Your Florida Lawn Under Drought Conditions.

3. Water grass and bedding plants only when they look stressed.

4. Don’t do anything to promote plant growth, like fertilizing or pruning. During a drought, just keep plants healthy, don’t push them to grow. Hold off on lawn and shrub fertilization until droughty conditions subside.

5. Make sure rainwater from your roof is collected in a rainbarrel or diverted onto soil where it will help plants. If you have gutters, don’t let them spill onto concrete or pavement where water is unused. You could add a raingarden feature in your yard. This is a grouping of native plants, that don’t mind wet feet, located in a low spot where water runs off impervious surfaces like rooftops and driveways. The raingarden will collect and slow the movement of water and the plants growing there are watered. Raingardens serve a higher purpose as well. They protect the groundwater by slowing the exit of water from your property long enough for the water to be absorbed and filtered by the plant roots. This helps prevent runoff and cleans the
water before it enters the aquifer. And that is important since our drinking water comes from the Floridan aquifer.

6. Increase your use of mulches to cut down on evaporation of moisture from the soil in the rootzone of plants, especially in beds. Keep mulch off rootball on trees and away from the trunk, however. Leaves, pine straw, pine bark and other tree bark make excellent mulches.

7. Plant a windbreak on the side of the property where prevailing winds blow. During drought, a windbreak of shrubs will reduce air flow through an area where plants tend to dry out in hot dry weather. Cutting down wind reduces evapotranspiration from plant leaves. Plants won’t dry out as quickly and you’ll use less water as a result.

8. Select plants that can take drought. Cut down on the amount of thirsty turfgrass in your lawn or use bahiagrass for your lawn. Use more perennials and fewer high maintenance annuals. Select drought tolerant plants when you change out or add new plants. Drought tolerant plants are able to withstand drought because they have one or more of the following features:
   • evolved in arid areas (We have many native plants that also occur in Texas such as Prickly Pear Cactus and Leucophyllum (Texas Sage)
   • have thick cuticle (waxy coating on leaf surface) which reduces water loss from leaf (Southern Magnolia)
   • have hairs on the leaf surface that cut air flow across the leaf surface & thus, cut water loss from the leaf (Beautyberry)
   • thicker leaves lose less water and are more drought tolerant (Aloe, Yucca, and Century plant)
   • smaller leaves lose less water and are more drought tolerant (Wax myrtle, Viburnum obovatum)
   • large surface root systems to quickly absorb small amounts of rainfall (some trees, shrubs, grasses)
   • deep root systems to tap deep water tables (some trees like pines)
   • avoid drought by dropping their leaves during droughts, and quickly regrowing new leaves when environmental conditions improve. (Similarly, Bahiagrass turns brown, then greens up once drought is past)

9. Don’t go on a planting spree. Before you replace all your thirsty plants with drought-tolerant species, remind yourself that all newly transplanted plants need extra water for a while to become established. The time required for establishment varies. Smaller plants establish more quickly than larger ones. So, how much extra watering is required for newly planted plants? One rule of thumb is 6-months for a gallon container, one-year for a three-gallon container plant, and six to 12-months for each inch in trunk diameter for newly planted trees. If you are planting seeds, they need to stay moist. Plants in pots, especially clay pots will need more frequent watering than those planted in the ground.

This document includes information from an article by Daniel Culbeth, Horticulture agent, UF/IFAS Okeechobee County Extension Service. Changes and additions were made by Barbara Smith, Horticulture Agent for Baker County Extension (2008).