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Water Conservation for Community Lawns and Landscapes

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Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ (FFL) educates Floridians about environmentally sustainable landscaping practices that conserve water and protect water quality while maintaining an attractive landscape. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ incorporates the following 9 principles that support sustainable landscaping: right plant, right place; water efficiently; fertilize appropriately; mulch; attract wildlife; manage yard pests responsibly; recycle yard waste; reduce stormwater runoff; and protect the waterfront. Any landscape can be Florida-friendly if it is designed and maintained according to FFL recommended practices. The following is a list of best management practices to help conserve water, reduce utility costs, and maintain healthy lawns and landscapes in your community.

Best Management Practices to Conserve Water in the Lawn and Landscape:

1. **Irrigate between 4:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m.**

   The most efficient time to irrigate a lawn and landscape is between 4:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. During these early morning hours, water will most efficiently soak into the soil and reach the root system with minimal loss to evaporation. In contrast, watering in the late afternoon or evening is not recommended, as moisture that remains on the leaves overnight, especially during warm, humid conditions, can promote the development of fungal diseases.

2. **Irrigate only when needed.**

   To maximize water conservation, irrigate only when your lawn or landscape plants show signs of needing water, rather than relying solely on a preset irrigation schedule. A lawn typically requires watering when about half of the grass appears dull and bluish-gray, the blades fold in half lengthwise, and footprints remain visible without rebounding back. Other landscape plants indicate drought stress through wilting leaves and when the soil is dry and crumbly to the touch. Established landscape plants typically survive on rainwater alone.

3. Water only ½" to ¾" per lawn irrigation event.

Applying ½" to ¾" of water will saturate the top 4"to 6" of soil, which is enough to cover the lawns root system and support healthy root development. Applying more water than the soil can absorb or the plant roots can use not only wastes water but can lead to runoff pollution.

To calibrate your irrigation system, follow this simple catch can method: https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/irrigation/calibrating-your-irrigation-system/

4. Mow to recommended height.

Mow your lawn to the recommended height for each grass type, as grass roots typically grow to the same depth as the leaf blades are tall. For example, standard (non-dwarf) varieties of St. Augustine grass should be mown to 3.5" to 4", which will allow roots to grow just as deep. Similarly, Bahia grass should be mowed to 3" to 4" for optimal root development. Cutting grass shorter than the recommended height limits root growth, making the lawn more vulnerable to drought and other stressors.

Turfgrass Species	Optimal Mow Height
St. Augustine (standard varieties)	3.5"- 4.0"
St. Augustine (dwarf varieties)	2.5"
Bahai	3.0"- 4.0"
Zoysia	2.0"– 2.4"
Bermuda	0.5"– 1.5"
Centipede	1.5"-2.0"

5. Spray only the landscape.

A well-designed and properly maintained irrigation system should water only the intended lawn and landscape areas. Misaligned or poorly adjusted sprinkler heads can spray onto driveways, sidewalks, and other hard surfaces, wasting water and contributing to non-point source pollution through runoff.

6. Avoid applying overhead water to landscape plants.

For both water efficiency and plant health, irrigation should be limited to turfgrass and groundcovers when using overhead systems. Landscape plants should be irrigated using a low-volume irrigation system that applies water directly to the roots. This method reduces water loss from evaporation and helps prevent fungal diseases caused by moisture remaining on leaves.

7. **Install a smart irrigation controller.**

Smart irrigation controllers use environmental queues to automatically irrigate (or not) according to the landscapes changing water needs. Smart irrigation controllers can measure either evapotranspiration or soil moisture levels to determine if the landscape needs to be irrigated. These types of controllers conserve water more efficiently than conventional irrigation controllers.

8. **Turn off irrigation during the rainy season.**

Overwatering often causes more problems than underwatering, especially when natural rainfall already supplies ample moisture to the landscape. Continuing to irrigate during this time can lead to fungal diseases, root rot, and other plant health issues. Simply turning off your irrigation system during the rainy season can help prevent these problems and conserve water.

9. **Inspect for leaks.**

Inspect your irrigation system regularly for leaks or broken sprinkler heads. Signs of a leak may include unusually soggy areas in the lawn or the presence of dollar weed, which thrives in overly wet conditions. Leaks and damaged sprinkler heads not only waste significant amounts of water but also increase your irrigation costs and can lead to uneven watering across your landscape.

10. **Follow the designated watering days set by your local water management district and utility providers.**

These guidelines are in place to promote the long-term sustainability of our groundwater and reclaimed water resources, ensuring that water remains available for both current and future needs.

References:

Mowing Your Florida Lawn: https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/LH028
Watering Your Florida Lawn: https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/LH025

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