

Don't Frown at the Brown! Backyard Water Conservation During the Drought

Most of us are lucky enough that the turn of a faucet guarantees water.

There it is! Abundant and clean, flowing freely, warm or cold - water is reliably available for our indiscriminate use.

But lately, seeing the dried beds and parched channels of our nearby streams and rivers provides a subtle reminder of our connection to our natural resources. Despite our lifestyles and our differences, we are all connected by our critical dependency on soil and water resources.

Throughout Ohio in towns like ours, the drying landscapes and shrinking waterways visually reinforce this connection and silently challenge us to do more and do better at conserving water. Though we are fortunate to live in an area that normally receives plenty of annual precipitation, it takes a drought to call us out! Though the dry weather might be draining our plants, our wallets and our spirits, now is a good time to gain a better understanding of water conservation measures and put them into practice. The Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District encourages everyone to do what we can, when we can, to conserve water starting in our own backyards.

Planting and Preparing

- Choose drought-resistant lawns, shrubs and plants.
- Stick with native plants and trees that are naturally able to cope with the climate. Native plants require less water, reduce runoff and flooding, require less maintenance and are more resistant to local plant diseases.
- Adding a layer of organic matter, such as mulch or compost, around trees and plants will add nutrients and increase the soil's ability to retain moisture.
- Consider the watering needs of plants and group similar ones together.
- Always test soil before adding fertilizers and do not fertilize during dry months as it will create thatch and decrease water availability.

Recognize plant strategies to survive the summer scorches

Ohio's average annual rainfall is usually more than enough water for grass to grow. A rule of thumb is that grass needs about 1 inch of water per week. But in the drought conditions we've been experiencing, plants can survive the lack of water by becoming dormant. Learn to recognize signs of dormancy and remember that plants are designed to do this so they can bounce back in better times.

- Grass: During dry spells, you can stop watering all together and the lawn will turn brown and go dormant. Once cooler weather returns, the morning dew and rainfall will bring your lawn back to its usual vigor. Most cool season grasses can go dormant for 4-8 weeks.
- Deciduous Trees: These trees deal with drought by closing down the stomata in their leaves and may even drop leaves early and enter a dormant state to stay alive.
- Evergreens: The waxy needle-like leaves with minimal surface area are what make coniferous trees the pros at water conservation and more drought-resistant than other plants.

Watering “Dews” and Do Nots

If you haven't already, let go of any hopes of a fairway-perfect lawn and drop the watering hose... we are in a drought and it is best not to water your lawn during this time. Remember, green grass turns brown in order to defeat the dry spell and survive. If watering limits are imposed in your community, please follow them. But if you have plants that must be watered, or during better, wetter times, here is a sprinkling of watering tips.

- When to Water? It is best to water in the early morning. This reduces water loss to evaporation and helps prevent fungus and garden pests. Also avoid watering when it is windy.
- How to Water? Water deeply, but infrequently. Most lawns are watered too often but with too little water. It's best to water only when the lawn really needs it, and then to water slowly and deeply. This trains the grass roots to grow downward in search of moisture.
- Watering Mechanisms Water your lawn in a way that imitates a slow, soaking rain by using soaker hoses or drip irrigation. This can save 50% of water compared to sprinklers. Efficiently control the amount and time of watering with water timers. Also, consider installing rain barrels to collect the rain that we do get.

Mower Magic

- Mow High Mowing high (keeping your lawn a bit long) will produce stronger, healthier grass with fewer pest problems. A lawn's ideal length will vary, but many grass species are healthiest when kept between three and four inches. Keeping grass at this height will help shade the soil and retain moisture thus preventing the lawn from drying out. Never mow more than 1/3 of the height of the grass.
- Then Let it Lie! By using a mulching mower or leaving short grass clippings on the grass, you are adding nitrogen back into the soil. Grass clippings are 90% water so they decompose quickly, add nutrients and also save the time and money it would take to bag the clippings.

For more information on backyard water conservation, please contact the Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District at www.geaugaswcd.com or 440-834-1122.