



Turf Battles
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There's something about a lawn. They're wonderful for rough-housing with the dog or the grandkids. They look pretty. They feel good on bare feet. It's a great place to park a "lawn" chair and sip a cool beverage on a hot summer afternoon. But we lawn owners are a bit guilt ridden: Too much water! Too many chemicals! Too much upkeep! How can we hold our heads up with pride when our turf is under attack?

Lawn owners, there are things we can do right now that will help with water management and yet allow us to proudly keep our beloved grass. Let's focus first on turf irrigation.

First assumption: you have already tested your current method of irrigation for obvious problems. You have made sure there are no leaks, no plugged filters or emitters, and that the irrigation coverage is appropriate (in other words, you're not watering the sidewalk or flooding your neighbors cactus collection -- just the lawn). Is the irrigation consistent over your lawn? You don't have some wet, boggy areas of too much water and other areas getting brown because not reached by the system? Here's a way to check that out. Eat several cans of tuna. Save the cans. Place them at various spots on your turf. Water. Check the fill level of the cans. Measure it, in fact, and get the average. You may find that some areas are getting more, some less. Time to make adjustments.

All right, now the initial evaluation is done. Best case scenario is that you find your current irrigation system is not wasting water or leaking, and is covering your lawn completely and consistently. You found no runoff. Good on ya, mate! For most of us, sadly that will not be the case.

Consider replacing your current inefficient system (overhead oscillating sprinkler? Hand watering? Rainbird-type pulsating sprinkler?) with micro sprinklers. They deliver an appropriate droplet size and can spray out to 30 feet with good consistency. The droplet size is important -- too big, and the spray won't reach far enough. Too fine, and the wind and evaporation will

prevent the droplets falling in the right pattern.

In the spirit of putting one's money where one's mouth is, we went to the irrigation/plumbing store and priced out what it would take to replace the current low-tech oscillating sprinkler with a micro-emitter set up. Our lawn is about 500 square feet. Put together a low cost system with basic timer, pressure reducer, black supply tubing, and micro-sprinklers on short stakes. Splurged on a fancy in-line filter for \$8. The whole thing from the faucet forward cost about \$85. Now, in order to mow, we will have to pull back the stakes/emitters from the edge of the lawn and then replace afterwards -- this takes about one minute, and saved a whole lot of time and money digging trenches for PVC lines and pop-up sprinklers. But, admittedly, not as sleek-looking.

Now let's talk about scheduling. During the current drought, follow your water provider's restrictions and guidelines. Some general rules of thumb for turf watering: water when it's **not hot** and **not windy**. That means late evening or very early morning -- like before 7 am. Next, water less often, but deeply, meaning twelve inches of moisture penetration. This promotes deep roots that can survive surface dryness. Check out your water penetration by using a probe, a flat thin shovel or a long screwdriver. There are guidelines about how to replace the moisture lost from ET, or evaporation and transpiration (water loss thru leaves). So, for example, in our area, in August, you may have to replace six to eight inches of water per month to make up for the losses. So, if you plan to water your lawn twice a week, you would have to put on two inches of water each time. This is where the tuna cans come in, remember.

Real time ET values, for those of you wanting more exactitude are available on line at eldoradocountyweather.com/water/index/irindex.php. This user-friendly site will tell you how much water has been lost (or gained) in the soil over the past seven days. Another device to guide your irrigation is the moisture sensor timer device, which will actually turn on your irrigation when the soil moisture reaches a certain point. This, however, was out of our price range.

Other things you can do to prevent your lawn from drying out during this summer of water limitation: Keep the mower raised. Longer grass shades the soil better and prevents losses. Dethatch to allow the precious water that you put on to actually penetrate down to the roots. Walk around in spiked boots to punch thru hard matted surface and let the water get down to those roots. Or, lacking a pair of spiked boots, there are aeration tools -- both hand and motorized versions. And spread some nice weed free mulch or compost and rake in to the lawn surface. This will help improve the soil texture and allows water to permeate.

Now, if all this sounds too complicated and you are now considering either ripping out your hair or your lawn -- don't do it! Turf has its benefits, such as cooling the air, encouraging water permeation and nitrogen uptake, and preventing erosion. Plus, even if you want to get rid of your lawn, any new plants, even drought hardy natives, will require substantial irrigation during the first one or two years. At least, wait until fall to take drastic measures.

So, as they say in the adult beverage world, enjoy your turf responsibly. By making a few changes in your irrigation schedule or equipment, you can have a healthy lawn AND feel great about it!

Join Master Gardeners at this Saturday's free public education class, Orchids in the Home. Learn how to grow and care for beautiful orchids in your home. There will be a repotting demonstration, and attendees may bring their orchids to class for the instructor to look at and answer questions. The May 17, 2014 class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building, 311 Fair Lane, Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions at local farmers markets and in their office at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville from Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon. Walk-ins are welcome, or call [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC Master Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.