

Q and A on Watering Trees

by Lynne Brosch

Question:

How much water do my trees and shrubs need?

I have heard that a stressed tree will be more susceptible to bark beetles and other disease. I want to keep my trees healthy by proper watering. How much water should that be?

Answer:

Even if you are running an irrigation system for your lawn you may need to water your trees separately. Deep watering promotes deep roots which help to make trees healthier and more able to withstand stress. The key is occasional deep watering, not frequent short bursts of water. You should not be watering at the trunk but further out at the tree's drip line. Tree roots spread out to 1 1/2 to 4 times the width of the tree's canopy. You want to water a tree to the depth of the root zone. A typical mature tree's root zone depth would be 18" to 36". To determine the success of your watering you will want to use a metal probe which can easily be pushed into the ground to the depth of the root zone. If you can't push the probe in easily your tree needs water. Once you have determined that the amount of time you watered has reached the root zone you will be able to determine how long to water. By testing for dryness you will also be able to determine when to water again. A larger mature tree should not need water often since it will have developed a deep root system. During the hot, dry summer months a tree would not need watering more than once a week unless there are very windy conditions which would cause more severe drying. We often forget about winter watering as we think the tree will get enough moisture from winter snows. However, if the snow has not been frequent or snow coverage comes late in the season, trees will need water to maintain root zone moisture. Mature trees will not need a great deal of watering if they have been maintained properly to adapt to dry intervals. You can keep moisture in the ground by spreading a 3 to 4" layer of organic mulch over the root zone. Young trees and shrubs will need more frequent watering but for less time as their root zones have not fully developed.

For more tips:

Vacaville Tree Foundation - a downloadable .pdf document, How to Water Your Tree

<http://phytosphere.com/vtf/>

Watering Trees and Shrubs, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension
<http://ag.arizona.edu/pubs/water/az1298/>