

June 5, 2019



Don't Stress over Water Stress  
by Susan Burnside  
UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

It's hard to imagine that water stress can affect our yards and gardens after such a robust, wet winter. Yet as the summer days get warmer, it's important to keep an eye on plants, trees, and lawns for signs of water stress from too little or too much watering.

In the case of too little water, it is essential that you recognize the first signs of water stress because there is a point where no amount of water will save a stricken plant. Some signs of drought stress in landscape plants and trees include wilted or drooping leaves that do not return to normal (without additional water) by morning, curled or yellow leaves that may fold or drop, leaves that become grayish or bluish, sunburned leaves, and new leaves that are smaller than normal. For lawns, look for wilted blades of grass, or grass that turns yellow and then eventually brown. You can also check to see if the lawn grasses retain a footprint for several minutes. If a lawn does not receive adequate water, it may gradually turn brown and go dormant.

If you suspect a plant is suffering from too little water, rule out other conditions that can resemble insufficient water such as disease, salts, insects, or frost; once you have ruled these out, check your water delivery system, especially if you are using sprinklers. According to the University of California, 20 to 40 percent of water applied to lawns and plants by sprinkler systems is wasted due to incorrect water pressure, system leaks, low or tilted sprinkler heads, broken sprinklers, and other sprinkler issues. Additionally, gardeners often supply more water than a healthy plant requires.

June 5, 2019

Be sure to irrigate early in the day to reduce water loss from evaporation and wind drift. Apply two to four inches of mulch around plants to keep weeds down, conserve soil moisture, and moderate soil temperatures. Be sure to keep the mulch three to six inches away from the trunk or stem of the plant to prevent rot. Add organic matter (compost) to your soil to improve the water-holding capacity of the soil during dry weather.

Resist the temptation to over-fertilize a water-stressed plant. Although many gardeners think of fertilizer as a little pick-me-up for plants, fertilizers stimulate leaf production and increase the need for more water. If you do fertilize, choose a low-nitrogen, slow-release fertilizer.

Overwatering your landscape plants can be just as damaging as not watering enough. Signs of overwatering, aside from obvious puddles and run-off, include leaves becoming yellow and dropping, and lawns that feel spongy or are turning yellow. Overwatering causes water logging (sometimes referred to as aeration deficit), which causes decay of feeder roots due to a lack of oxygen. Plants, trees and lawns may appear drought-stricken because the uptake of oxygen and nutrients is severely limited.

If you think you may be overwatering plants, be sure to check your water delivery system and consider the soil texture. Plants growing in clay soil have different watering needs than those growing in sandy soil, so you may need to adjust the duration and frequency of each watering session.

You can find more information about managing water stress in these UC ANR publications:

*Keeping Plants Alive under Drought or Water Restrictions.*  
<http://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8553.pdf>

*The UC Guide to Healthy Lawns.* <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/TOOLS/TURF/>

Join Master Gardeners on June 8 in the Sherwood Demonstration Garden for a hands-on talk on “Irrigation, the Good the Bad and the Ugly.” In addition, the Succulent Garden will be open for questions and plant diagnosis. Come admire the diverse beauty of these low-water plants.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See [http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration\\_Garden](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden) for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see [http://ucanr.edu/master\\_gardener\\_e-news](http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news). Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.