

Drought Proofing Your Landscape

Drought proofing your landscape can help your grass and other landscape materials withstand the dry periods that we experience periodically. Some simple landscape management practices are effective, regardless of the type(s) of turfgrass you have on your landscape.

The goal when drought proofing your landscape is to grow a good quality lawn that will survive dry periods with limited irrigation. A lawn properly prepared for the periodic dry periods that we typically see here in west central Florida will have a deep and extensive root system. These tips can help deepen your turf's roots and protect the health of your landscape.

Irrigation

On your irrigation day, use the cycle and soak method. This alternate irrigation method allows the water to fully soak into the soil and eliminates water running to the street and drainage systems. It helps keep nutrients in the landscape, where you want them, and helps roots dive deeper.

How to Cycle and Soak

1. Reduce each zone's run time by half i.e., change a 20-minute run time to 10 minutes.

2. Set the first start time, as usual.

3. Set a second start time to begin one hour after all zones will have completed the first watering cycle.

Pro Tip: Use the seasonal feature on your controller to reduce all the zone run times with one change. For example, select the seasonal feature and reduce the percentage from 100 to 50 to cut set run times in half.

Mowing

Avoid cutting your grass too close to the ground. The University of Florida advises that St. Augustine grass should be mowed to a height no less than 3 inches. Then, it should be mowed only after it reaches a height of 4 to 4.5 inches. This increases leaf area and allows the plant to make and store more nutrients. The higher the mowing height, the deeper and more extensive the root system will be.

Fertilization

Fertilization during drought should be reduced or postponed. If you must fertilize, apply a product with slow-release nitrogen and phosphorus to avoid encouraging rapid shoot growth. Look for a fertilizer with a high potassium level (the 3rd number on the bag) to help enhance drought tolerance. Supplemental iron applications can help keep turf green during dry periods without promoting new shoot growth.

Pest Control

In time of drought, it is best to only spot-treat any small area that might be affected by a pest. The irrigation, mowing and fertilization practices suggested here can help reduce the need for pest control measures.

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Alternatives to Turfgrass

If you are struggling to grow and maintain healthy turfgrass, turf may not be the best choice of landscape material for your yard.

Alternatives to turf, once established, can provide a green, vibrant landscape with little or no supplemental irrigation.

Two easy-to-grow groundcovers, with minimal water requirements, are perennial peanut and sunshine mimosa.

Perennial Peanut

Perennial peanut is a versatile groundcover that blooms all summer long with cheerful golden flowers. It can be placed on its own as groundcover in larger beds or used as a lawn alternative in areas that receive low levels of foot traffic. It also can be inter-planted within some existing lawns.



Perennial peanut is evergreen in frost-free areas of the state. In colder parts of the state, it will drop its leaves, exposing its brown roots. If you're using perennial peanut as a lawn substitute, you can overseed the area with ryegrass to keep the area looking green throughout the winter.

Sunshine Mimosa

Sunshine mimosa, is a native, low-growing Florida groundcover that is increasingly being used in home and commercial settings. This versatile plant also attracts butterflies and serves as a host plant for butterfly larvae. From spring through fall, sunshine mimosa has pink, ball-shaped flowers. With bright green, fern-like leaves that fold when touched, this plant looks fragile, but it's actually quite resilient and can withstand some light traffic.



Sunshine mimosa spreads quickly. As few as four or five pots can cover up to 300 square feet in a season. However, it's not an overly aggressive plant and can be intermixed with turfgrass or other plants. Once established, sunshine mimosa has a fairly deep root system that can help control erosion and make it drought tolerant.

Seasonal Irrigation

Seasonal irrigation is an easy way to help your landscape be healthy.

Often, homeowners are unaware that an irrigation system should be adjusted seasonally. When irrigation is not seasonally adjusted, overwatering can occur.

Overwatering harms the long-term health of your turf. Long-term turf problems can include an increased disease susceptibility, thatch buildup and a shorter root system. As a result, your turf's overall stress tolerance will be reduced along with its ability to survive with less water. Additionally, overwatering promotes the growth of certain weed species such as dollarweed and sedges.

Suggested Seasonal Run Times for Turf

For spray heads, use the following recommendations:

- Winter - 0 to 10 minutes
- Spring - 15 to 20 minutes
- Summer - 20 to 30 minutes*
- Fall - 10 to 20 minutes

For rotors, use the following recommendations:

- Winter - 0 to 20 minutes
- Spring - 35 to 55 minutes
- Summer - 40 to 60 minutes*
- Fall - 20 to 40 minutes

** This recommended run time only reduces overirrigation when the irrigation system is equipped with the state-required working rain interruption device set in active mode.*

Recommendations excerpted from "Home Irrigation and Landscape Combinations for Water Conservation in Florida," ABE 355, published by the University of Florida/Institute for Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Email SaveH2O@MyPasco.net if you have questions about information provided in this document.