



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

WATERING DURING WINTER DROUGHT

By Trish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I never water my lawn and plants in the winter but am wondering what happens when we experience an unusual long dry spell like this December?

A Thank you for asking this question. For those of us who care about our landscapes, we should be paying attention to this extended winter period of dry air and low precipitation. Without supplemental water, plant root systems may experience injury or death. During the summer we are clued in to water stress by wilting and dropping leaves. Plants that experience fall and winter drought can't tell us something is wrong until the next year when they fail to thrive. These drought-injured plants may not show symptoms of the problem until much later. In fact, they may leaf out and flower just fine in the spring, relying on stored food reserves. Once that energy supply runs out, plants may weaken and start dying back. Even if a plant survives, it is more susceptible to insect and disease attack.

Lawns also are prone to winter damage from dehydration. Newly established lawns, whether seed or sod, are especially susceptible to damage.

And don't forget to irrigate your trees, especially juveniles, evergreen trees, and hardwood trees that have not lost their leaves. Most established large trees have a root spread equal to or greater than the height of the tree. This is the area to water. Note: If water stands around the base of a tree, it can freeze and damage the bark.

Water only when air temperatures are above freezing. Apply water early in the day, so it will have time to soak in before a possible night of freezing temperatures.

A slight misting or a little drizzle will not provide enough water. This is especially true for young, unestablished plants, but even mature plants benefit from infrequent, deep watering during dry winters. If we do not get a good soaking rain for more than a couple of weeks, you probably need to provide supplemental irrigation. Dig down a few inches and feel the soil. If it's dry, please water.

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