

If you want to save water at home, start outside the house

In light of this year's conservation district poster contest theme being about water, I wanted to share some tips with everyone about conserving water around your home. The best way to do this is not inside the house but outside as it is estimated that 50% of home water use goes towards landscaping and turfgrass areas.

First, like with many other things, you should make a plan on how to tackle this. Look at everything in your yard and landscaping from the slope of the ground to the types of plants in the area to the areas exposure to sun and wind. Steep slopes can lead to water running off before it has time to absorb so if this is a problem, terracing might be an option to consider. Some types of plants are more drought tolerant than others and some need more water to remain. If an area has trees, the canopy might reduce your soil temperatures and reduce evaporation loss. But if the trees are maples, the surface-feeding roots might be robbing moisture from your turf or other shallower rooted plants. If an area has more exposure to sun and wind, you might consider adding mulch to your flower beds or trees in that area to help reduce evaporation.

Second, improve the soil quality in the area. The biggest way to improve the soil is to increase organic matter. All the types of soil found in Kansas can benefit from the addition of organic matter. In sandy soils, the organic matter slows down the infiltration of water so the plants have time to take up the water. In clay type soils, the organic matter increases the infiltration so the water can get to the roots of the plants. Unfortunately, adding organic matter is not a one-time process and must be done yearly and is easiest done before planting.

Third, when choosing what plants you want in your landscaping, choose plants that are appropriate for the area. In our area that probably means more drought tolerant varieties and plants that can stand up to temperature extremes. In Rawlins county, we are in planting zone 5b so select plants that can tolerate growing in this zone. Also remember that drought tolerant doesn't mean no maintenance. Even plants that are suitable for this area can get stressed by the extremes and become more susceptible to insects and disease. Making sure that the plants get enough water, have the proper nutrients available and are properly pruned can help them deal with that stress.

Fourth, water efficiently and effectively for your plants and soil types. I've written previous articles on watering and so I won't repeat everything here again but make sure the way and amounts you are watering is appropriate for the plants that you have.

Here are 10 more tips on how to improve water use in your landscape:

1. Water deeply but not deeper than the root zone of the plant.
2. Water slowly. Turn down the flow and if you notice water puddling or running off, stop and let it soak in before applying the rest.
3. Water infrequently. Frequent, shallow watering can cause plants to have shallower root systems and make them more susceptible to soil moisture fluctuations.
4. Loosen soil surface and add mulches. Compacted areas absorb water slowly.
5. Avoid runoff by creating "basins" around trees.
6. Follow the directions of your irrigation equipment and check regularly for leaks, malfunctions and worn parts.

7. Reduce fertilizer applications. Growing plants require more water than just maintenance levels and when you need to save water, maintenance levels should be the goal.
8. Keep your landscape well weeded. Save that water for the plants that you want to be there.
9. When water needs to be conserved, don't be afraid to lower your standards for a perfect landscape.
10. If water needs to be drastically conserved, try to save your trees and shrubs first as flowers and turf are cheaper and easier to replace.

Hopefully these tips can help you further save on your water usage and if you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Rawlins County Extension Office with any questions.