

The Two Things We Do Wrong With Lawns

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The Lawn 9-1-1; Emergency Management for Your Drought Stressed Lawn program will be 7 p.m. Monday night, March 25th at the 4-H/Sr. Citizen' Building on Spring Valley Road.

Homeowners regularly shoot themselves in the foot, or rather their lawns, with how they mow and how they irrigate. You need to remember that for an established lawn, irrigation is optional. You can let it go dormant during a drought and most of the grass will still survive. But if you want to try to keep your lawn looking nice and green through the hottest and driest of summers, you need to do irrigate it corrently!

For most of our soils in this area, one foot of soil will hold about 1.75 inches of water. Sandier soils will hold less. Unfortunately, you can't put on that much water at once because the soil won't soak it up fast enough. We can thank our high clay content for that. Most lawns, and I'm talking tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass now, will need one inch of water per week, 1.5 inches if it is real hot and dry. If it doesn't rain at all, those are your target application rates. These guidelines only apply to established lawns. New lawns have different requirements.

When you water your lawn, you need to apply enough water to soak up at least 6 inches of soil which is going to take between ½ and 1 inch of irrigation. Right now we have adequate soil moisture in our lawns. If we go a couple of weeks without much precipitation then we need to be thinking about applying ½ to ¾ inch of irrigation per week. This should be done once per week. When we get further into summer, and it becomes hot and dry, then twice a week.

When I ask you how much water you are applying to your lawn, don't tell me how many minutes the system is set to run. You need to know how much water you are applying. Put rain gauges around your lawn or use tuna cans set level in the grass. You want to apply as much irrigation at one time as you can without having runoff. You may have to run your system 2 or 3 times to apply that ½ to ¾ inch amount. The time in between the system cycling back around to the same area will allow the water to soak in.

What you don't want to do is have the system run just a little bit each day. You soak up only the top inch, or so, of soil and that's where the grass will grow it's roots. Soak deeper and create a more deeply rooted lawn. You also want to irrigate from about 2 a.m. to 10 a.m. Wind speeds are lower, temperatures are lower, and humidity is higher. You will waste less water. **DO NOT** irrigate in the late afternoon or evening!

Mowing is actually quite simple. Set your lawn mower as tall as it will go and mow as needed so that you aren't removing more than 1/3 the total length of the grass blades. A taller mowing height gives longer leaf blades. Longer leaf blades shade the soil better so that keeps it cooler and gives less opportunity for weeds to sprout and grow. Longer leaf blades also provide more food for the plant to grow a more extensive root system which makes it more drought resistant. Bluegrass should be mowed 2½ to 3 inches tall (or taller) and tall fescue 3 to 3½ inches tall (or taller). If you constantly mow shorter than this, you will have more weeds and your fescue lawn will start to thin out and become clumpy.

Your lawn will react exactly to how you manage it. You will have a better looking lawn, fewer weeds and lower water bills **IF** you mow your lawn tall and irrigate less often but more deeply. The choice is up to you!