



HOW TO WEATHER A DROUGHT

Sooner or later, a drought will hit your area. Whether this period of abnormally low moisture is long or short, you can plan and prepare for your lawn's survival, even with very limited water.

Pre-Drought Maintenance

For existing lawns, maintenance practices 30-45 days prior to an expected drought, dry period or excessively hot time of year can help make your lawn as strong and healthy as possible to withstand the stress.

Reduce thatch and compaction as early in the year as possible so that water, air and nutrients can easily reach the roots. Thatch can act like a sponge, capturing water before it reaches the roots while compaction can increase runoff and decrease saturation.

Reduce or eliminate nitrogen (N) fertilizer which can overly promote leaf growth, at the cost of low root activity when turfgrass is stressed. Plan on fertilizing in the fall when top growth slows down and root growth increases. Avoid applying herbicides for weed control because they can lessen the vigor of turfgrass roots.

Practice proper watering techniques. Water early in the morning, when the combination of cooler temperatures and less wind will reduce the water lost through evaporation. Water infrequently and deeply to encourage roots to go deeper where moisture remains available longer.

Follow the one-third rule when mowing, removing no more than one-third of the turfgrass leaf blade. Keep the mower blade sharp. Dull mower blades tear and shred the leaf blades of turfgrass rather than cutting them cleanly.

Shredded leaf blades increase water loss and make the plant more susceptible to disease. Mow at the upper range of the recommended mowing heights for your turfgrass variety to promote deep rooting and maximize soil shading. Allow grass clippings to remain on the lawn (grass-cycling) to return moisture and nutrients. Do not remove clumps of grass clippings because they will block the sun and heat up as they decay, killing the underlying grass.

Dealing with Drought

At the earliest stages of a drought, or when the temperatures reach high levels for a week or more, additional steps can be taken, as long as adequate landscape water is available. While continuing the practices listed above, add these steps:

Mow less and only in the early morning or evening when temperatures are cooler because turfgrass loses moisture after every mowing. Reduce traffic on the lawn at all times if possible, but especially during the heat of the day when foot traffic and even mowing can injure the turfgrass plants and cause almost immediate dehydration.

Increase watering on areas near buildings and other heat reflecting surfaces and on high or sloped areas where wind can dry the lawn faster and water may not penetrate as deeply. If the drought and/or hot weather continues for an



Photo by Jim Novak

Proactive preparation helps your lawn weather a drought.

extended period, or watering restrictions are implemented, these steps should be employed according to the severity of conditions:

Eliminate all traffic on the lawn. Restrict watering to those areas determined as most important. Let the grass go dormant naturally by withholding water, except for a quarter-inch (0.6 mm) every four to six weeks to keep the vital turfgrass crowns hydrated and capable of greening up when temperatures cool and moisture is again available.



When the Drought Breaks

At the end of a drought, when cooler