

The Greenery's Guide to Water Wise Gardening

Step #2– Tips for Trees and Shrubs

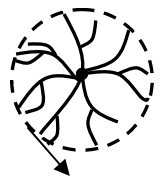
As California faces possible voluntary or mandated water restrictions, homeowners must rethink ways of conserving water to allow their landscape to thrive. Conventional sprinkler systems may be fine for lawns, ground cover and bedding plants which require only a few inches of water penetration to keep the root zone healthy. This is not the case for established trees and large shrubs which benefit from infrequent irrigating consisting of a slow, deep watering. This method does not apply to newly planted trees and shrubs which require special watering needs until their roots are adequately developed. Frequent irrigation for shorter periods of time may be necessary for a year or more depending on the plant's needs.

SINCE CONVENTIONAL SPRINKLER SYSTEMS are not designed to handle drought situations, you might consider one of the following options for established trees and shrubs:

- Converting your sprinklers in the planter area to a more efficient drip irrigation system. Kits are available at most hardware stores.
- Shutting down the sprinklers which service trees and shrubs and replacing them with manually controlled soaker hoses.
- Using a root irrigator, such as the "Ross Root Feeder" (for large trees). This is a hose end device with a shaft that waters up to two feet below the soil's surface.

Slow, deep soaking limits runoff, reduces evaporation and encourages plants to develop deep roots that are better able to tolerate drought.

THE ROOTS OF VARIOUS PLANTS grow to different depths. It is essential to apply just enough water to keep the entire root zone moist. In general, tree and shrub roots are found in the top 2 feet of soil. Therefore, if water penetration is one foot or less, then part of the root zone will be under hydrated. This will cause more surface roots and the plant will not be as healthy. You should focus the water around the "drip line" of the tree or shrub. The "drip line" is simply the edge of the root zone which runs the perimeter of the plants canopy. (See diagram at right).



WE'VE ESTABLISHED THAT trees and shrubs benefit from infrequent irrigating applied very slowly. The next step is to find the correct amount of water for plants needs. This is not so easy to determine due to varying soil types. Some soils are sandy and drain very quickly, while some are heavier and hold moisture longer. Others have a "compaction" which consists of a layer of very hard soil below the ground's surface which makes water penetration very difficult. However, unlike hardpan, you can and should dig through the compaction layer to create better drainage.

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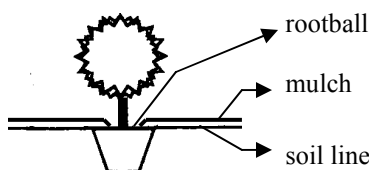
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SO, HOW MUCH WATER IS ENOUGH for plants to better tolerate a drought or to conserve water? There is no simple answer. This is best addressed by testing your soil on occasion. Knowing that the root zone on larger plants is approximately 2 feet deep, we suggest digging a hole 12 to 18 inches deep at any point of the plant's "drip line". Check the soil moisture the day before the next watering. If the soil is very dry, you will need to water slowly for a longer period of time. If the soil is very damp, the plant has enough water and is not ready to be watered yet. To determine the soil's moisture deeper than one foot, we suggest using an inexpensive "moisture meter" available at The Greenery Nursery. After digging 12 to 18 inches, insert the meter's probe about 6 inches deep. The meter will indicate the wetness or dryness of the root zone. To get a true reading of the moisture meter, consult with the staff at THE GREENERY NURSERY.

ANOTHER EXCELLENT METHOD of conserving water is the use of organic mulches in your planting beds. By spreading 3 or 4 inches of mulch around your trees and shrubs, this will act as an insulating blanket. Slowing down evaporation from the soil and helping keep the ground cooler is its main benefit. It helps reduce weeds too! Keep the following in mind:

- The blanket of mulch should not be mixed with any other soils. Be sure not to change the soil level around the trunk, as this may result in the death of the plant. *(See diagram below)*



The goal of **WaterWise gardening and maintenance** is to conserve water and keep our trees and shrubs healthy. By following the above suggestions many landscapes will adjust to infrequent watering needs. Just imagine needing to water your yard once every 10 to 14 days? It is possible!

The Greenery Nursery is set up to be a resource center for all WaterWise concerns. Just ask and we will gladly address your specific needs.