

Smart watering for lawns: Don't let the lawn squeeze you dry

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Part of being a smart gardener is using resources wisely. With the number of hot summers Michigan has had lately, smart water use is certainly at the top of the list. One of the areas in the home landscape that can use a tremendous amount of water is the lawn.

Lawns need a certain amount of water to look good and stay healthy, but using too much or too little water can create problems that could be avoided. Using too much water can be expensive whether using a municipal water system or running a well pump into failure.

The first thing every lawn caretaker must decide is what quality of lawn they want. That includes the “no care, abandoned property lawn” to the “all the bells and whistles show lawn.” Most lawn caretakers fall somewhere between the two extremes. A frequent question that Michigan State University Extension horticulture educators are asked is how to have a decent lawn without spending a lot of money and time.



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Several ways to save your lawn

Set your mower at the highest setting to mow your grass to 3.5 to 4 inches finished height; the longer the blade, the larger the root system. The larger root mass will support a robust, more drought-tolerant plant. This can be done by gradually raising the mower deck with each

mowing in the spring. MSU research has shown that grub damage can be eliminated simply by adopting this practice.

Get a soil test. Determine what nutrients need to be added to your lawn to improve its growth. A [soil test](#) will give you a recommendation of what fertilizers to use. Lawn grass does not require high amounts of [phosphorus](#), so lawn fertilizers do not contain them. Order the Home Lawn and Garden Soil Test Mailer from the MSU Extension Bookstore (www.shop.msu.edu) for \$25 and receive a recommendation for your lawn.

Water correctly. A lawn usually requires 1 inch of water per week. It doesn't make a difference whether it falls from the sky or comes out of a hose. Buy a rain gauge; it measures how much rain has fallen. It is easier to replace any missing rain when you know what has fallen. During the summer months, lawn roots are typically about 3 to 4 inches deep. In the late spring and early fall, the roots go a bit more deeply, so heavy soakings are not necessary.



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Watering should be divided into several applications per week. On sandy soils, it may be every other day. On heavier soils, it may be every third day. Lawns do not require multiple water applications a day.

It is best to water during daylight hours. Watering in

the evening creates wet grass and with warm nights can enable certain lawn fungal diseases to become active.

Lawn watering equipment can be simple or complicated. Lawn sprinklers are used by many lawn owners. They are attached to a hose and moved around. Lawn irrigation systems are the permanently installed systems that can be set to water automatically. More advanced systems have a built-in rain gauge and will adjust automatically to rain amounts. If water usage is important, consider upgrading your system.

Whichever kind of lawn irrigation system you have, staying with the 1 inch a week total may change what you are currently doing. Your lawn and your wallet will thank you.

Additional resources

- MSUSoilTest.com

For more information on a wide variety of **smart gardening** articles, or to find out about smart gardening classes and events, visit www.migarden.msu.edu.



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