

Watering your Florida Keys Lawn

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Water is important in maintaining a healthy quality lawn. By over-irrigating or irrigating incorrectly, turfgrass can be damaged resulting in:

- A less developed and shorter root system that will not seek out water and nutrients at lower soil depths, making the turf more susceptible to attack by insects, some diseases and nematodes.
- An overly succulent shoot system is susceptible to diseases and insect infestations.

How often to water

It is recommend to water your lawn on an “as needed basis.” Water when your lawn displays the signs of drought, such as:

- Leaf blades are folded in half lengthwise in an attempt to conserve water.
- Grass color looks blue-gray, rather than green.
- Footprints or tire tracks remain visible on the grass long after being made.

When you see these signs of a large portion of your lawn, it is time to irrigate.

How much to water

The amount of water used to irrigate your lawn should wet only the turfgrass root zone. Light, frequent watering is inefficient and encourages shallow root systems. Excessive irrigation, which keeps the root system saturated with water, is also harmful to the lawn.

A simple watering schedule would be to apply $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch of water when the turfgrass shows signs of water stress. Do not apply any more water until the drought signs reappear. If rainfall occurs, irrigation should be suspended until visible drought symptoms reappear.

When to water

The best time for lawn irrigation is in the early morning hours. Watering during the day wastes water due to excessive evaporation and can even scald the lawn when the temperature is high. Watering in late afternoon or late morning may be detrimental if it

extends the time the lawn is naturally wet from dew. This extended wet period can accelerate disease occurrence.

How to uniformly apply water

Inspect your irrigation system on a monthly basis. Turn it on to make sure that the irrigation zones overlap and there are no dry spots between zones. Check the irrigation heads to see that they work properly, look for damaged or clogged heads, and make sure no leaks occur.

An easy way to routinely check your irrigation system is to place small, straight-sided cans with their bottoms intact (tuna or cat food cans) in a straight line from your sprinkler to the edge of the watering pattern and look for uniformity of coverage. If an area is not receiving water from one or more heads, or if a head is not providing complete coverage, dry turf spots can develop. This can lead to any of the problems associated with drought-stress turf and dry spots can develop. While checking uniformity with the can method, you can easily determine how long it takes your system to apply $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch of water. Turn the water on for 15 minutes and calculate the average depth of water in the cans. Multiply this number by four to determine the irrigation rate in inches per hour.

While checking for damaged sprinkler heads, replace any that are leaking or not providing uniform coverage. Also check to ensure that valves open and close properly.

By learning these simple principles about proper lawn irrigation, you can create a healthy lawn that is better able to withstand environmental stresses such as wear, high temperatures, nutrient problems and withstand insect, weed and disease problems.

This article comes from a University of Florida Extension publication “Watering your Florida Lawn” by Dr. Laurie Trenholm, J.B. Unruh, and J.L. Cisar. This and other informative turf publications can be viewed online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>, the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences publication site.