

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Lawns are thirsty. If you want to cut down on garden watering, consider reducing the size of your lawn, especially in shady areas, where grass does not grow well, or on slopes, where it is difficult to water and mow. For your remaining lawn, consider the following guidelines.

Mow your lawn to a height of 1-1/2 to 2 inches. Long blades shade the soil and encourage deeper root growth. The deeper the roots, the more drought-tolerant your lawn will be.

Remove no more than 1/3 of the height at each mowing and leave the lawn clippings on the lawn. The clippings help retain moisture and provide the lawn with nutrients. You can purchase a mulching mower, but if you mow often, the clippings left by your regular mower will break down just fine.

Allow your lawn to dry out between waterings. You will know when your grass needs water because it will not spring back up when you walk on it. It's best to water early in the morning before the sun comes up.

To know how long to water, put out shallow cans with straight sides and flat bottoms, and see how long it takes to collect one inch of water. One inch per week (including rainfall) should be sufficient for a green lawn throughout the summer.

If you see water puddling on the surface of your lawn, turn off the sprinkler until the water is absorbed and then turn it on again until you've applied the inch the lawn needs. Avoid applying less than one inch at a time as that encourages shallow root growth and shallow roots dry out more quickly than deep ones. The exception is very sandy soil, which drains quickly. In this case, 1/2 inch of water applied twice a week is more efficient.

For more detailed information on watering, check out the watering chart in "Smart Watering," a free downloadable publication you can find at www.savingwater.org.

In areas where you rarely walk, consider allowing your lawn to go brown in the summer months. As long as you give the lawn a thorough soak once a month, watering to a depth of at least six inches (you can check by digging down), it will survive until the rains come again.

Avoid over fertilizing, as over fertilized lawns need more water. You can make two applications of slow-release fertilizer, one in early September and the other in mid to late May. If you want to fertilize only once a year, make a single application of slow-release fertilizer in late fall. Don't fertilize unless you can be sure of moisture as dry fertilizer is not absorbed and may burn the grass if it sits on it too long.

September or May are good times for general lawn maintenance. A small layer of thatch on the surface of your lawn is beneficial but a dense mat makes it difficult for water to reach grass roots. If your lawn has a thatch build-up of more than 1/2 inch, rake this off with a power or hand rake.

If you've noticed that even with a series of short applications of water, water tends to run off your lawn, it could be because the soil is compacted. To help water and oxygen penetrate down to root level, aerate your lawn when the soil is moist and leave the soil cores on the surface to decompose.

If you notice bare patches in your lawn, overseed to thicken the lawn and crowd out weeds.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.