



# Dealing with the Drought

## Lawn Care

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With recent drought conditions and hot temperatures, landscape plants have become water-stressed. The most noticeable landscape element is the lawn. Instead of a lush green color, many lawns have already gone dormant, turning a greenish-yellow to straw-brown.

When grass is under heat and drought stress and goes dormant, leaves will die and turn straw color. However, it's more important to look at the crowns and root systems to determine the true state of the grass. Peel the leaves away slowly and look for the green crown at ground level. Roots should be a white to gray color.

Once soil temperatures climb above 70 degrees, root growth ceases on cool-season grasses such as bluegrass, ryegrass and the fescues.

Fortunately, lawns are equipped for hot dry conditions. Instead of wilting and dying like many plants, they simply go dormant if they have become established for a year. Like a hibernating bear, a dormant lawn does not need food or water. When conditions are more ideal, usually in September, the grass will awaken and turn green.

That being said, a lawn still needs some water during the summer, or it will progress from dormancy to death.

A lawn that is watered through the summer will result in a green, lush appearance. On the downside, a lush, green lawn is also more inviting to insects such as white grubs and sod webworms. And, turfgrass diseases are more common. While these responses may point against watering during the summer, a newly sodded or seeded lawn may need to be watered throughout the summer to reduce drought stress and to prevent the plants from actually dying.

Lawns with a thick thatch layer are also more prone to dying and thus may need the watering. Thick thatch can be controlled in the fall with dethatching machines and aeration. A healthy lawn with little or no thatch would be better able to go through summer in its dormant state.

As a basic rule of thumb, lawns need at least  $\frac{1}{3}$  inch of water every three weeks during the summer in order for crowns and roots to remain active. The turf won't be green and lush, but it will recover quickly when more water and cooler conditions return.

You won't need to mow a dormant lawn often. Weeds may invade, but they can be controlled by digging or spot-treating with a herbicide.

If you want a thick, lush turf and decide to water, it's important that you water faithfully. Repeatedly letting the lawn go dormant and then watering it to "green it up" can be stressful to the lawn and encourage diseases, die-out, weed invasions and insect infestations.

An inch of water is needed once a week to keep the lawn green when temperatures are lower than 85 degrees. At higher temperatures, lawns may need 2 inches of water, applied in two separate applications.

Water early in the morning as temperatures rise so that the grass blades can dry quickly. With early morning watering, little water is lost to evaporation. Watering at night is not encouraged because it leads to diseases. So if you live in a community with restricted watering hours, you are better off to water in the morning.

Avoid daily waterings. Give your lawn infrequent, deep waterings rather than frequent, light irrigations that keep roots close to the soil surface and drying conditions.

Also, raise the mowing height to 2½ to 3½ inches. The crown and roots of the plant stay cooler, and the added top-growth is less stressful to the lawn than a short crew-cut. Having a taller lawn will help shade out summer weeds that like to take over when the lawn thins out. When leaf blades are long, the roots will tend to be deep; when the leaf blades are mowed short, roots tend to stay shallow. Ideally, the mower blade needs to be raised before the hot, dry weather starts.

If you decide to not water your lawn through the summer, do **NOT** fertilize. Fertilizing at this time would stimulate the grass plant to grow when it ideally should go

dormant. Stimulating grass growth in hot weather, especially without water, subjects the lawn to further stress.

If you are in an area that constantly experiences drought conditions, consider choosing a more drought resistant grass such as the turf-type tall fescues, the native warm-season zoysiagrass or native buffalograss. The latter two will remain green throughout the summer but brown out from October through May.

Come September, strive to improve the overall health of your lawn. Consider overseeding with new, improved cultivars, aerate to stimulate root growth, and fertilize to improve the thickness of the turf.



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