Water wisely

The key to proper watering is to apply only the amount of water needed at the best time using the best methods possible to reduce water loss and negative impacts to plants. Consider planting drought tolerant or native plants.

Most lawns require about one inch of water each week to remain actively growing during summer months. Vegetable crops require about one to two inches each week depending on root depth, growth stage, and soil type. This represents a lot of water. When there is a lack of weekly rainfall, it is crucial that irrigators pay close attention to the weather and water wisely. Not only does improper irrigation waste valuable water, but excess irrigation water can carry fertilizers, pesticides and other pollutants to ground and surface waters.

☐ Choose the right plant for the right spot.
☐ Recycle your yard waste.
☐ Use fertilizers and pesticides responsibly.
☐ Reduce runoff from your yard and increase groundwater recharge.
☐ Reduce soil erosion. Keep it planted and mulched.
☐ Pick up after your pets.
☐ Use and dispose of fuels and hazardous products properly.

When using sprinklers:
☐ Avoid irrigating during hot, windy times of the day to reduce evaporation loss—early morning is best as wet plant foliage during evening hours can increase plant disease.
☐ Be sure automatic sprinklers have a manual control option—irrigate according to weekly needs, taking into account rainfall amounts and not a set, automatic schedule.
☐ Avoid irrigating paved surfaces, roads and driveways.
☐ Use shallow cans to measure the amount of water being applied.
☐ Adjust the flow rate to the sprinklers to avoid surface runoff.

One key to proper automatic sprinkler use is to understand how to operate the control unit.

Other important tips

- Consider planting drought tolerant plants — especially in those spots where the soil is already very dry and sandy. Soils differ in the amount of water they can hold, so save moisture-loving plants for areas with finer, heavier soils.
- During a serious, prolonged drought consider allowing lawns to go naturally dormant, because watering can actually stress the grass more by forcing it to grow under such adverse conditions.
- Use rain barrels or cisterns to collect and store rainwater.
- Use mulch to conserve soil moisture in beds and gardens. Increase soil organic matter (and soil moisture holding capacity) through mulching and adding compost or other organic soil amendments.

For more information:

URI Sustainable Trees and Shrubs Manual

URI Master Gardener Hotline:
1 (800) 448-1011 (M-Th, 9AM to 2 PM)
Call to get your gardening questions answered

URI Home*A*Syst Program
web.uri.edu/safewater
(401) 874-5398
Information on protecting your drinking water

These rain barrels collect and store roof runoff and are gravity fed to a scaker hose within in a perennial garden. Davisville, North Kingstown, RI. May 2003.