Drought Bringing Texas-size Thirst to Trees, Plants, Turf Statewide

While much of the focus on the statewide drought has been about its effect on crops and livestock, its impact on trees, plants and turf grass should not be overlooked. We've had an unusually dry winter, and most parts of the state are way behind in their average rainfall. As a result, a lot of people are going to have serious plant and turf losses if they don't do something pretty soon to address the problem.

The poor condition of many trees, plants and lawns across the state has far more to do with the lack of rain than the season. A lot of what people are seeing around the state in the way of wilted, dried-up looking trees and plants, sparse leaves and dry and ‘crispy' lawn turf is because they're thirsty, not because of colder winter temperatures. We've had a relatively mild winter, with few hard freezes in the state this year. Many people are mistaking the signs of ‘stress' on trees, plants and turf for their natural response to winter conditions, such as going dormant.

Even hearty and drought-tolerant trees and plants are developing signs of severe drought stress. Hollies, Ligustrum and live oak are all showing stress in this area, and we're seeing a lot of dead or dying magnolias. Even many older, more well-established trees and plants are showing sparse foliage and blooms, brown branches and shriveled wood. Brown and "crispy" lawns are also a typical sight throughout the state.

The No.1 loss for turf grass in the winter time is dessication (drying out), not low temperature kill," said Dr. Jim McAfee, Extension turf grass specialist in Dallas. "And if the soil is dry when a freeze occurs, there will be greater turf damage from the freeze."

Watering turf grass adequately during winter drought is also important because the root systems of surrounding trees are depleting moisture from the ground and making it harder for the turf to survive, McAfee added. "I'm concerned about what will happen to many lawns in Texas this winter because the soil is dry and people are not watering their lawns," he added.

Many Texas residents are uncertain about how much to water their lawns this winter. If you're in a area where there has been no significant rain for two to three weeks or more, it's probably time to water. The best way to determine whether a lawn needs watering is to use a spade or shovel and probe about 6 to 8 inches below the soil surface. If there's no moisture or only a few inches of moisture at the top, you should consider supplemental watering. Water needs to penetrate far enough down to provide nutrition to the root system to be of any significant benefit. People in more drought-stricken areas may assume their turf is beyond help and dig it up to make room for new sod. It's really too early to be thinking about doing anything that drastic at this point. With some supplemental watering and additional care, even turf grass in very poor condition may be saved. It's best to wait until late March or early April to decide if your turf looks as if it will ultimately survive.

When you water your lawn, you have to remember to water your trees and plants at the same time. You should apply a minimum of 1 inch of ‘top dressing' to your lawn at least two times a year, preferably in late February and mid-October. In times of serious drought, trees, shrubs and grass should receive about an inch of supplemental water per week. Soil holds enough water to nourish trees, plants and turf grass for about two to three weeks. In addition to watering at least every three weeks during growing season, you should water less often and for longer periods of time to get adequate penetration. Additional watering and horticultural maintenance now can save many Texas residents lot of time, trouble and expense in the spring. It will add to your water bill and there is some time and expense associated with mulching and composting. But when you consider what it may cost later for new trees or plants – or to put new sod on your lawn – it's probably well worth it.

Additional information on winter watering during drought can be found at http://www.plantanswers.com/drought_watering.htm .