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The leaves are raked up, lawn mowed for the last time, and the sprinkler system winterized. We see the garden editor articles and various web site pieces pleading for us to water. But the hoses are rolled up and the lawn looks like all the others in the neighborhood. For all we know, the landscape is dormant and our attention turns to wintertime activities.

Why do my plants need winter water?

The landscape is not really dormant but rather a resting state. Lawn roots are active. Trees and shrubs have ongoing activity in the wood – primarily for disease defense. Evergreens still have needles that are actively producing food and utilizing water.

Problems avoided with winter watering.

Lawn Mites – Winter mites thrive on droughty lawns. Winter watering will not completely eliminate mites from drought prone areas, but will curtail much of the damage.

Brittleness – Remember the severe tree damage in the snow storms of 2003? Trees and shrubs that were watered sustained considerably less damage. Their branches were more supple and able to handle the snow load. Dry, un-watered plants broke like toothpicks.

Sunscald – Sunscald is a problem on thin barked plants where the water conducting tissues die during the winter. Winter watering will help avoid sunscald and cankers from forming.

Spring Deadwood – Trees and shrubs that are not winter watered have more dead branches in the spring. Not only do the above ground parts of the tree dry out, but also the roots. Plants that are shallow rooted are very susceptible to roots desiccating – leading to their demise. When the roots die, the result is part of the tree dies as well.

How do I Winter Water?

To replenish the lawn, the only answer is to get the garden hose and set out a sprinkler. Concentrate on areas with south and west facing slopes and especially around large evergreen trees. Evergreens are notorious for pulling water from the soil drying out the grass over the winter. These areas may need watering every other week.

For the trees and shrubs you must water within the drip line of the tree. You should moisten the soil to a depth of 12" around the plant. There are several devices available at your local garden center that can accomplish this. It should be done once or twice per month when there is no snow cover. Or, a simpler solution is to contact Swingle to put together a thorough watering program specific to your landscape's needs.

For additional information on the methods and amount to water visit www.watersaver.org and click on "Save our Shade."

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