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Irrigating Trees and Shrubs During Drought

Bob Schultheis, natural resource engineering specialist with University of Missouri Extension in Webster County says dry weather has led to lots of questions about irrigating trees and shrubs.

This week, Schultheis provides answers to some of the most common questions he is getting.

Q: I've noticed lots of shade trees with dying branches or dropping leaves early this summer. Are we losing them to drought?

A: Many of our shade trees are in declining health due to several consecutive years of below-normal rainfall. Normally, we do not water shade trees, but with the dry weather, we need to help out Mother Nature with irrigation.

Q: How much water does a shade tree need?

A: A tree planted within the last three years needs about five gallons of water per week through the growing season. A mature 30-foot tall oak tree may need as much as 39,000 gallons of water to replenish a totally dry root zone. Fortunately, we don't have to apply that much water. If we slowly soak just 20 percent of the root system, we can keep these trees alive.

Q: What is a simple way to check if the soil needs water?

A: Push an 8 to 10 inch long screwdriver into the ground. If it won't go in 4 to 8 inches, water is needed. Another sign is if footprints remain in grass after it is walked on. By the time you see plants wilting, it is past time to water.

Q: What are good ways to apply water slowly to trees and container plants?

A: Lay a soaker hose around the tree drip-line, turn the water faucet no more than one-quarter of the way on and run it one to two hours each week. For small trees and shrubs, use a five-gallon bucket with a tiny hole drilled in the bottom. A 5/64-inch hole will apply water at about 2 gallons per hour, and a 1/8-inch hole will apply water at five gallons per hour.

For more information, contact the nearest University of Missouri Extension Center and ask for MU guide G6879, "*Irrigating Trees and Shrubs During Summer Drought*," MU Guide G6720, "*Home Lawn Watering Guide*" and G6912 "*Water-Efficient Gardening and Landscaping*."

These guides are also available online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore> or by calling the MU Extension office in Webster County at (417) 859-2044.

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