

Watering in Landscapes

Most of us are transplants from wetter (and hence friendlier) climes. Understanding the philosophy of desert watering to me means understanding the concept of deep watering.

Deep watering is beneficial in any climate, but especially so in the desert. Deep watering can be defined as thoroughly soaking the root zone of a plant to eliminate any water deficit that may exist. Sort of like recharging your teenage daughters phone card every month. You want to put enough water in the “bank,” so to speak, for the plant to draw from for a period of time. A deep watering is followed by several days of no water, allowing the soil profile to dry out before the next water event. In this area, our water has a fair amount of salt content, so the deep watering cycle is also used to move the salt below the root zone of the plant. Short, frequent watering events can be the kiss of death for many of our desert adapted species. A small amount of water will quickly evaporate leaving behind a salt deposit. You can sometimes see this as a white residue on the outside of the wet zone around the drippers.

An example of a deep watering schedule in hot temperatures and low humidity, a well functioning drip system should be running the drips 1.5 hours every third day. As the seasons change and temperatures drop, I will increase the days between watering events while not changing the 1.5 hours of run time. In a wet, cool season, I may shut the clock off altogether, taking advantage of Ma Nature’s free (and salt-free) bounty. Some folks have luck with even longer run times, especially on trees. A good rule of thumb for shrubs is to run the system until you see a wet spot completely surround the bottom of the plant. I like to pick out certain plants that get stressed out first and use them to warn me when it is time to water. Plants will exhibit water deficit with grayish and /or drooping foliage.

A couple of things to watch out for are power outages and stuck valves. If your irrigation timer has a backup battery, be sure it is fresh. Most should be changed out at least twice a year. These batteries will hold your program in the clock in the event of a power outage.

A stuck valve is a malfunctioning valve that will not shut off completely, resulting in over-watered plants and some truly outstanding water bills. This problem can sometimes be hard to catch, especially if the valve is only stuck part way open. In this case, only a few drippers on the low end of the system may be running. Diligence is the key to spotting these potential problems. By paying attention to what is going on with the plants our yards, we can not only satisfy what is, for some of us, a deep-rooted need to be a part of nature, but save us dollars and time as well.