

Sizzling Summer in the Garden

It's summer, and it's hot! The unrelenting heat of summer adds another dimension to gardening activities. Tending the garden in the hot weather warrants some precautions—working in the garden or yard in the cooler hours is a good choice. Wear a hat, and drink plenty of water before, during and after working outside. Drinking smaller amounts (6 to 8 ounces) of water every 15 minutes is more effective than consuming larger amounts less often. Wear light-colored clothing and sunscreen. When possible to help nurture and protect plants during high summer heat, reduce the temperatures in the garden—add shade by shade cloth or other temporary shade structure. Containers or pots can be shrouded with shade cloth to decrease surface temperatures of the container. Some signs of heat stress in plants include wilting, dead or dying foliage and brown leaves. Dull or gray-green foliage or new leaves smaller than normal are also signs of heat stress in plants. Wilting is also a normal plant response to heat extremes and is one way the plant minimizes water loss. Wait until evening when temperatures cool to see if the plant recovers before adding extra water. How much water a plant needs is dependent on the type of plant, where it is growing and the type of soil where it is planted. A simple way to determine moisture in the soil is to feel the soil with fingers, or insert a long screwdriver or piece of rebar 12 to 18 inches into the soil and see if there is moist soil adhered to the tool. A more quantitative way to check soil moisture is to use a soil water meter probe. The soil may feel dry on the top, but the meter will detect deeper soil moisture. This will help alleviate containers from sitting too long in water which floods the roots, leading to the potential demise of the plant.

Some other tips for managing gardens during the hot, sizzling months of summer into fall include:

Water deeply and regularly in the morning or at night. Drip systems help deliver water specifically to the root zones of the plants. Trees and plants with deep roots may be watered less frequently, but slowly and longer. The roots will seek a water supply and tend to grow deeper and stronger when watered deeply and less frequently.

Hold off adding new plants to the garden or landscape until fall. The onset of early winter rain and cooler temperatures better supports new root growth. Now is the time to nurture existing plants, and check plants for heat stress.

Avoid fertilizing plants and trees during hot summer months. Adding nutrients (nitrogen) to stimulate new growth during hot months is not recommended—new growth increases the need for more water.

Mulch! A covering of mulch helps insulate soil and helps decrease evaporation at the soil level. A good 4 to 6-inch layer of shredded bark, straw or other mulch helps protect the small surface roots, and as mulch decomposes, the health of the soil is enhanced.

For more information go to: cecolusa.ucanr.edu