

How to water established trees



Water according to tree's water needs

Different trees have different water requirements. For example, established coast live oaks require little if any supplemental water with no irrigation during the summer. Western sycamores, in contrast, require water throughout the year. Most non-native trees need supplemental water, especially in summer. It is best to water when needed rather than relying on a timer since water needs are highly variable.

Water where the roots are

In healthy trees most water and air exchange occurs in the upper 12 to 18 inches of soil. The root systems of mature trees can extend out two to four times the diameter of the dripline. Apply water evenly under and beyond the dripline to a depth of about twelve inches. Do not water around the trunk of the tree. Trees adapted to dry climates often succumb to diseases that infect the trees at the base (crown).

Infrequently but thoroughly

Wet the soil in the root zone thoroughly and then allow the soil below the surface to dry before watering again. Use a soil probe to determine whether the soil is dry. Water plants in well-drained soils more often and for shorter periods of time than those in heavier, clayey soils.

Before extreme weather

Thoroughly hydrate plants before extreme hot, dry weather sets in. Well hydrated plants also withstand frost conditions better.

Water in morning

Water in early morning when it is cool and the winds are calm.

Types of irrigation

Soaker hose, drip: Placed beneath mulch this is the most efficient method of irrigation. It is important to water most of the root zone so emitters must be distributed properly. A single soaker hose circling the trunk of a tree is worse than no water at all. This encourages the growth of roots around the base that may ultimately girdle and strangle the tree, limits the size of the root system, and promotes disease-causing micro-organisms.

Overhead sprinkler: Less efficient but can distribute water evenly over large area. Can monitor water more easily than subsurface methods. Water close to surface to reduce water loss due to evaporation and drift.

Hand watering: Gives the greatest control over where water goes but it is time-consuming. Most people cannot stand there long enough to properly water a mature tree but may be okay for newly planted trees.

Mulch

Mulch reduces water loss, controls weeds, and moderates soil temperature at the surface. It is critical that water penetrates mulch, soaking soil beneath it to a depth of at least 12 inches. During droughts, clear mulch, apply water and replace mulch to a depth of 3 - 4 inches. Always keep mulch away from the trunk of the tree.

During drought emergency

Lawns are water hogs and easily replaced. Concentrate on keeping trees alive and healthy. Make every drop count.