

More water is rarely the answer**June 30, 2016**

Many homeowners incorrectly associate irrigation frequency with turfgrass quality. Too frequently, the solution to a yellow, thin, and slow growing lawn is turn up the irrigation frequency, amount, or both. This “solution” is most common during the summer. While turfgrass do require more irrigation during dry summer months, water is rarely the correct solution for a poor performing lawn.

It is easy to determine if a lawn or turf area is under light to moderate drought stress. The stand will have a light blue-gray coloration, the leaves become narrow, and footprints are slow to bounce back. This level of drought is rarely lethal for all of our lawn turf species, especially when short-lived. It is actually good management to withhold irrigation until these symptoms are observed to promote deep rooting, slow respiration, and reduce leaf wetness and succulence which favors disease and insect pests. Irrigate slowly and deeply once these symptoms are observed.

A lawn that is thin, yellow, and weedy during summer is most commonly suffering from nitrogen fertilizer deficiency. This is especially true for lawns under 15 years old or for lawns sodded over poor soil. It could also be suffering from a disease during summer. In these cases, increasing irrigation will worsen the problem because the excess water will promote disease, shallow rooting, and potentially leach available nitrogen. A better solution would be to apply a slow release fertilizer beginning in mid-June to feed the lawn going into the stressful summer months. I prefer products that have at least 50-60% water insoluble nitrogen (WIN) to sustain even nitrogen release. A slower release nitrogen fertilizer will also minimize the risk of burn and prevent a surge in growth that may favor some diseases.

An application of slow-release nitrogen fertilizer can go a long way to improve the performance of lawn turf during the summer. Simply increasing irrigation typically exacerbates lawn problems and wastes water/money. Instead irrigate deeply when you see visible symptoms of drought.

Bill Kreuser, Extension Turfgrass Specialist, wkreuser2@unl.edu



This lawn is the classic over-watered yet under maintained turf stand. The irrigation system is ran every day for 20-30 minutes per zone yet the lawn hasn't received application of fertilizer in years. Simply adding more water will do little to improve this lawn during the summer.