

How to Tell When Your Lawn Grass is Wilting

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Many people give a puzzled look when I asked if they know how to tell when their lawn is wilting. They have all seen house plants or garden plants wilt from lack of water with the characteristic hanging leaves. But most people have not been exposed to the idea of grass plants wilting. Recognizing when a lawn is wilting is an important tool both in conserving water and in preventing drought damage to lawns.

When lawn grasses wilt they turn a more grayish-green color and the leaf blades roll up and appear narrower. If the lawn is a little tall, it will lay down somewhat when it is wilting, and when you walk on a wilting lawn, it does not spring back up like it does normally.

Walking on a wilted lawn will usually leave impressions of your foot steps in the grass which do not quickly disappear because wilted grass does not spring back up. Also, the soil under a lawn that is wilting or nearly wilting lawn will feel hard as opposed to soft and springy like soil under turf usually feels.

Advantages of recognizing lawn wilt

After describing how to recognize a wilting lawn many people realize they have seen these signs before in lawns. But most people do not know why it matters to be able to recognize when a lawn wilts or of what advantage it could be. The advantages are that you can tell when a lawn needs to be watered and also when a lawn is approaching a level of dryness that is potentially damaging.

The first advantage is if you water your lawn only when it needs it, this wilting will tell when to water. As long as a lawn is watered within a day or so of starting to wilt, there will be no damage or unsightly brown spots. This is one of the most effective ways to conserve water while watering a lawn. If you wait until you see some wilting to turn the water on then you are only giving the lawn what it needs to stay green and will not be wasting water.

Some liken this to “playing chicken” with your lawn. But if you are attentive there is little risk to damaging your lawn and big potential savings in water use.

Since most other landscape plants need less water than a lawn there is also little risk in damaging trees, shrubs or flowers unless they are recently planted. I have practiced the method of watering when the lawn wilts for years, and my lawn is on gravelly soil so it is a bit trickier to manage, yet I rarely ever have any brown spots from lack of water even though I let my lawn wilt before I water it.

Recognize irrigation/sprinkler problems

The other advantage of recognizing lawn wilting is that you can recognize potential problems in your irrigation system before they cause brown patches. Many people now have electronically controlled irrigation systems and incorrectly assume their watering worries are taken care of.

But many problems can and do occur with sprinkler systems. Sometimes the systems are not correctly designed or installed even by so-called professionals. If a system is not correctly installed, uneven distribution of water can lead to dry spots.

Also, even in a properly installed system, individual sprinkler heads may malfunction or become misaligned, again leading to dry spots. So being able to recognize wilted spots in your lawn before they turn into brown spots can help you pinpoint and correct problems in your irrigation system.

Fix watering system; avoid wasted water

In this push-button world, we often are reluctant to do much maintenance or checking on our sprinkler systems. We often simply turn the water up on the whole yard to cover up for one or two small dry spots rather than actually identifying and fixing the problem. This leads to most of the yard being over-watered and huge amounts of wasted water.

Again, being able to recognize some wilted patches of lawn can help us identify and fix problems with the sprinkler system before the spots turn brown.

Lawns need only half of July's water in spring, fall

Also we should never water our lawns the same amount in spring or fall as we do in mid-summer. In early May or late September lawns need less than half what they need in July or August. So our watering should never be the same throughout the season. If you are running your sprinklers less in spring and fall than in mid-summer like you should be, then the ability to recognize lawn wilting will let you know when it is time to turn up the water.

Also if we have extended rainy periods you should turn down or turn off your sprinkler system. Watching for the start of wilting in your lawn can tell you when it is time again to resume irrigation.

Being able to recognize a wilted lawn has distinct advantages. The easiest way to manage lawn watering to conserve water is to let the lawn tell you when it needs water. Even if you have an automatic sprinkler system, you can still choose to run it manually starting each station only as that part of the lawn shows that it needs water.