New Year’s Resolution: Change your lawn care practices

With the extreme drought in 2012, which is continuing into 2013, we need to change our previous practices. In 2013, it is predicted that we will stay in a persistent drought.

Do any of us know how long we can depend on the underground water source: the Ogallala Aquifer? Some predictions state the Ogallala Aquifer will last until 2050 while others say 2035. For every nine gallons we use from the Ogallala Aquifer, we only replace one.

What has been replaced in 2012? Do we understand that there is little to no subsoil moisture? In parts of Nebraska and Colorado, tests have discovered that we need to go to a depth of 3-8 feet to subsoil moisture.

What does this mean for our lawn practices? Let me cite one example from the City of Aurora Water Department. Their water restrictions limit watering the garden and grass to three days a week year-round. They are also reminding people that you should not water your grass until May. In fact, waiting until that time keeps the grass dormant and helps build deeper root systems.

What can you do to test your lawn to see if it needs to be watered? Before watering your lawn, I would take a screwdriver and poke it into the soil. If the screwdriver can be pushed easily into the soil and can be pushed where the handle of the screwdriver is at ground level, do not water your grass.

On the other hand, if you cannot push the screwdriver even an inch into the soil, then your grass needs to be watered. If the screwdriver can be pushed even halfway into the soil easily, your grass still does not need to be watered.

Another indicator to test whether your lawn needs to be watered is by walking across the lawn and examining what happens with your footprints. If your footprints remain after several minutes, your lawn needs to be watered. If your footprints disappear immediately, the grass is well-watered.

In order to practice the best lawn care, you must understand what type of soil you have that is supporting your grass. If you have sandy soil, your grass will need to be watered more than the same grass which is growing in clay or loam soil.

Loamy-clay soils can be irrigated less frequently. They do require larger quantities of water, according to Colorado State University turf specialist Tony Koski and horticulture agent Skinner.

In addition, Koski and Skinner recommend not applying all the water in a short period of time. It is more effective to apply only a portion of the water by switching stations to allow time before returning to that station for the water to soak into the soil.

Water between the hours of 10 p.m. and midnight or 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. Studies show that watering at night does not encourage disease development.

Once you understand the soil you have, the next step is to understand the type of grass you have. If you have either a buffalo grass or a blue grama turf, these grasses can stay green without watering for weeks. I would recommend checking into some of the newer cultivars of buffalo grass, which have a greener look. You could save not only on water but on fertilizer as well.

If you have either a ryegrass or bluegrass turf, you may have to apply 2.25 inches of water a week in dry weather. Lastly, if you have a tall fescue lawn, this would be the same amount of water per week as a bluegrass lawn to keep it healthy.

Keeping a lawn healthy can be a full-time job. I have always considered turf to be a high maintenance crop. Like any other plant, what you put into it is a reflection of what you get out of it. In the teamwork between humans and plants, proper timing on fertilization and irrigation will

give you a better looking and healthier turf that is disease- and insect-free.

Even though in Phillips County we are not limited to a three-day watering schedule all year-round, I would recommend practicing this for the sake of our future and in consideration of others, like our children and grandchildren.

If you are interested in more information on irrigating your lawn, check out Colorado State University Extension Fact Sheet number 7.239 titled: “Operating and Maintaining a Home Irrigation System.” Go online to CSU Extension Fact Sheets and Publications at www.ext.colostate.edu .

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