

Ask The Plant Groom(tm) by Dale Groom, The Plant Groom(tm)

QA1088

I'm new to landscaping. This spring and early summer I planted several new trees and shrubs. My trees are Live Oaks, Southern Magnolias, Sweet Gums, Red and Silver Maples, Bradford Pears, Slash Pines, Willows, and Redbuds.

I'm confused on how much I should be watering during this heat wave we're having. I've been laying the water hose near the trunk and leave it there for about 30 to 45 minutes everyday or at least every other day.

Several leaves have been turning yellow, brown, and falling off. I think I may have been over watering. Now....I'm gun-shy about how much I should water during 90-100 degree days.

What is the correct answer on how much I should water newly planted trees during our heat?

I look forward to your answer. Thanks. - R. M.

First, let's review your selected trees.

Unless you are very lucky and have an acidic soil pH slash pine is short lived in prairie soils. Aleppo, Afghan, Austrian and Japanese black pines will do well long term in alkaline pH soils from the OK border to the Gulf Coast. These puppies even grow in the Midland/Odessa area. Imagine that! If they grow in Midland/Odessa they will grow just about anywhere the soils drain well in TX. I wouldn't plant silver leaf maples if you purchased and delivered them to my home. They are short lived, weak wooded and problem prone. Willows are water sponges and will suck up all the water they can get. They are not Water Wise trees. They too are short lived and problem prone.

Of the trees in your list Live Oak is the best investment. They will grow well in alkaline or acidic soil pH conditions and once established make growth rates of 3-4' per year. Red buds will perform well in both pH conditions also. My favorite variety of redbud is 'Oklahoma'. Southern Magnolia(Magnolia grandiflora) prefers acidic soil pH but will perform well in alkaline soils if they are deep and drain well. This is also true for Sweet Gum.

While sweet gum provides an interesting shape, texture and good fall color it is not one of my favorites. Judy, my child bride of (37) years and I with Aaron and Angela, our two older children lived in Tyler for (7) years. The home was a quality built older home in the edge of the azalea district. Shade was provided by sweet gum trees and the fall color was good. However the seed structures or sweet gum balls were a royal pain to keep removed in the lawn on the walk and driveway after they decided to drop. I don't mind the leaves but when I try to slip out the door early Sunday morning to catch the comics before the family attacks them in bare feet the balls were obstacles to be avoided because they will provide pain and a trick surface to walk on. I think their best applications are in back yards near property lines or on acreage away from the home and enjoy their fall colors from a distance. I continue to enjoy them but, at a distance.

If your red maples are Japanese red maples I hope they are planted as under story trees and receive dappled filtered light throughout the day. These are quality long lived trees in their preferred locations.

Northern red maples do not normally do well long term in most of TX and I wouldn't have them in my landscape. Caddo maple is super and Shantung maple is an outstanding Texas Super Star(tm) plant as designated by Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A & M University System. More information on Texas Super Stars is available at <http://texassuperstar.com>. While at the site be sure to review the new Vitex and Tomato 444 on the Texas Super Star plant list, both are outstanding. All plants on this list are real world tested and great choices for our landscapes and gardens.

Bradford Pears are acceptable ornamental to medium shade trees. The fall color and spring bloom is usually good. They normally grow well in acidic and alkaline soils that drain well. These puppies have a non desirable habit of splitting down the center from crown to the ground as mature specimens if they are not pruned properly. Remove sharp angled limbs during their early stages of growth and allow the wide angled limbs to remain to maturity is the best cultural practice to prevent this potential problem.

It sounds like you may be watering your trees to death. Oxygen must be available in the root zone of landscape plants to grow healthy roots. Healthy plant growth requires healthy root growth. Without oxygen to the roots, plants may begin visually dying from the top down. They may be setting in water but can not absorb and move it through the plants' pipelines because oxygen is not available in the root zone.

Never water on a preset schedule. Only water as needed to maintain moisture in the root zone. When irrigation is required to provide needed moisture water deeply and throughly. Maintain a 3-4" deep layer of your favorite organic mulch such as shredded pine bark, shredded hardwood bark, shredded tree trimmings or similar material from the trunks to 12" beyond the edge of the original planting hole. This cultural practice will conserve soil moisture, reduce weed competitions, moderate soil temperatures and aid in providing favorable conditions for healthy root growth. Remember, you can't grow healthy plants without healthy roots. And this does include trees or all types.

The most important part of your tree to be watered is the root/soil ball. Check to make sure they are moist. The tool I use is my finger for this activity and if it gets soiled I take it to a water source and wash it. Loose soil around new trees is most often different in porosity and structure than the soil/root ball of plants. It is critical these be kept moist until new roots have grown out of their original arrangements when planted and into the surrounding native soils.

Soil on top of soil/root balls often cause problems with insufficient oxygen from reaching the root zone. Check with your hands and make sure no soil is in top of your trees soil root ball. If you discover that they are covered with soil remove it to the original soil /root ball top. Organic mulch on top of a root/soil ball as I have previously mentioned is a positive and highly recommended cultural practice. Soil on top of any root/soil ball may a serious problem.

Water no more often than is necessary to maintain soil moisture in your target trees root/soil ball structures. I'd be surprised if this needs to be done more than once per week. Always check the soil moisture before irrigating then if needed water deeply and throughly.

Remember, the very best time of the year to install trees in Texas landscapes is in the Fall. Oct. and Nov. are prime months . Dec. Is good also. This timing provides as much as eight months for plants to begin establishing root systems prior to our annual blast furnace heat and lack of natural irrigation ... annually.

Dale Groom, Extension Horticulturist Dallas County, Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A & M University System, Native Texan, Columnist, Author, Radio-TV Host will answer your lawn, garden, landscape or other horticultural questions here in his column. You may send your questions to Dale at dalegroom@mycvc.net. To speak with a Master Gardener free M-F, 8:30am - 4pm, dial 214-904-3053.

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