

## Four Simple Landscape Practices that Can Help Conserve and Preserve Water

Doug Caldwell, Commercial Landscape Horticulture

*The deflector shield is the white plastic strip, resembling a shortened bicycle fender, just above the wheel (see pointer) that can be lowered to block fertilizer from shooting out to the right of the applicator.*



A recent opportunity to present landscape fertilizer practices to the Naples City Council earlier this month helped me boil down, in my mind, the multitude of recommendations that can be found in the FYN (Florida Yards and Neighborhood) program, see 2006 updated, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, FYN Handbook at: <http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/fyn/> and the 'Florida Green Industries Best Management Practices [BMPs] for Protection of Water Resources in Florida' at <http://turf.ufl.edu/BMPmanual.pdf> or call us for a copy these wisdom booklets.

The four major practices that would conserve water and reduce potential fertilizer or pesticide environmental risks are:

**1/ Use your rain sensor**, if you do not have one, you need to, as it is a local ordinance which code enforcement personnel can cite/fine you for not having. Check your rains sensor to make sure it is working; most brands can be adjusted to set it so that the right amount of rainfall shuts off the irrigation system time clock.

**2/ Practice drought conditioning**. The aim is to develop deeper rooted turf that won't require as much water and a denser root system that will capture fertilizer elements more effectively. An A and B are needed here:

**A. Watch the blades (grass)** to determine when to water. Water when the blades start to look a little wilted. Use 1 to 1.5 inches of water per week in the summer (rainfall will normally be sufficient, hence the need to use a rain sensor to prevent those embarrassing moments when the irrigation goes on during the afternoon rainstorm). Otherwise, dispense this water with two irrigation periods per week during the summer. Longer, less frequent watering will encourage deeper rooting. During the winter, AKA, the dry season, we have short days and cooler temperatures. Turf growth slows and may even go dormant. Use half as much water, run the irrigation once per week in the winter and shoot for 0.5 to 0.75 "per week.

**B. Watch the blades (mowers).** Mow St. Augustine (Floritam) turfgrass at 3 to 4 inches. It looks to me like many lawns are getting scalped. These lawns will have short, stunted roots. Mowing higher will enhance the development of a deeper root system.



**Dry season.**



**Same view, rainy season.**

**3/ Follow the ring of responsibility rule** when applying fertilizer and pesticides around ponds and surface water. This requires keeping a ten foot buffer if you do not have a deflector shield on your fertilizer spreader. If you have a deflector shield, you can target the granules to land within three feet of the high water mark.

**4/ Carefully select your fertilizer type and calculate how much you apply.** Follow the BMP standards and do your math, so that you are using about four to six pounds of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. **per year** (0.5 to 1.0 pound per application) of turf or plant bed area. Use low nitrogen and very low phosphorous (P) containing fertilizer, such as an 8(N)-1(P)-12(K).

Communities should make an effort to remind those that will be departing for the summer to set their irrigation clocks so that they reduce their irrigation time (or shut them off!) and also confirm that they have a rain sensor that works. Have observant neighbors or an irrigation-lawn care service keep an eye on their yards and adjust the irrigation time as needed. Just because you can irrigate three times per week, doesn't mean that you need to!

Remember that a healthy, dense sward of turf is like a sponge and will utilize the majority of the fertilizer applied as well as absorb pesticides that are applied to it. Without turf to capture or slow runoff, we would have increased erosion (bad for home foundations!) and a decrease in water clarity.

Doug Caldwell is the Commercial Landscape Horticulture educator with the Cooperative Extension Service, an off-campus branch of the University of Florida, Institute of the Food and Agricultural Sciences and a department of the Public Services Division of Collier County government. E-mail [dlcaldwell@ifas.ufl.edu](mailto:dlcaldwell@ifas.ufl.edu) Call 239-353-4244 x203. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin. For updates on the Southwest Florida Horticulture Learning Center and more landscape pest management details, visit <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu>.