

KATHY LUTHER: Watering lawns in a drought isn't always the best solution

By Kathy Luther

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A recent article in The Times highlighted the fact that our region is a little on the dry side this year, and much of the state is in a moderate drought. Up until last weekend's storms, we have experienced enough of a shortfall of rainfall to be categorized as "abnormally dry" by the U.S. Drought Monitor website.

According to maps on **iClimate.org**, a website of the Indiana State Climatologist, precipitation in the region for the past three-month period was about four inches below mean for the same season during the past 30 years or so. Even though the 1 to 1 ½ inches of rainfall last Saturday will help, it's still a good time to think about ways to conserve water around the yard.

One thing to realize in a dry spell such as this is that it is normal for turf grass to go into a dormant stage. This will look a bit brown, but this is the lawn's preferred survival mechanism. If you can stand having your yard less than lush, it's not necessarily bad to let it do its thing. If you think about all the hundreds of things we need water for, is growing grass the most important use during an unusually parched season? The lawn won't die as long as it gets about a half-inch every three weeks.

When you feel you just have to water, here are some tips to maximize efficiency:

- Water your lawn and garden in the morning when temperatures are cooler to minimize evaporation.
- If water runs off your lawn easily -- either because you have clay soil like mine or steep slopes -- split your watering time into shorter periods, applying water for five minutes, and then repeat two to three times to allow time for absorption instead of ponding or runoff.
- Adjust sprinklers so only your lawn is watered and not the house, sidewalk or street.
- Adjust your lawn mower to a higher setting. A taller lawn shades roots and holds soil moisture better than if it is closely clipped.
- Use sprinklers for large areas of grass. For small patches, water by hand to avoid waste.
- Don't water your lawn on windy days when most of the water blows away or evaporates.
- To decrease water from being wasted on sloping lawns, use a rain gauge or empty tuna can to track rainfall on your lawn. Then reduce your watering accordingly.
- If you don't have a rain gauge, get a kitchen timer when watering your lawn or garden to remind you when to stop. A running hose can discharge up to 10 gallons a minute.

In flower beds and vegetable gardens:

- Resist new plantings during dry periods, they will require frequent watering.

- Spreading a layer of organic mulch around plants retains moisture and saves water, time and money.
- Water your plants deeply but less frequently to encourage deep root growth and drought tolerance.

Stay tuned next month for water conservation tips for your pool, hot tub and other recreation features.

Kathy Luther is director of environmental management for the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission. The opinions are the writer's.