



Drought



*Professor M.L. Robinson
conducts an irrigation class*

Living in the desert means learning to live with less water. Fortunately for us, the water recycling efforts of the water authority make it seem as if there is no end of water for our use! When I first arrived in the great American Southwest, I asked a person about water shortages. He answered, “No, we have the lake.” I was a little stunned, especially since I had seen pictures of the big white ring around Lake Mead, indicating how far the levels had dropped.

I try to tell people that although we occasionally get rain, the area is still dry. Even if the region had not been in the midst of a drought for a decade, it is still a desert. We can go into the house and get something to drink, but plants, being rooted in the ground, do not have that option. Since local landscapes usually have irrigation installed, it can be easy to forget that as trees and shrubs grow, their water

needs grow as well.

Could you go out to the yard and see trees growing in place for five or more years still receiving only the water provided by a couple of drip emitters close to the trunk? It is more than likely that tree needs considerably more water than it is receiving, which can obviously be a source of some major problems.

Although poor drainage is actually a major cause of landscape plant death, the opposite can also kill or injure them.

The first indication of water shortfall is that the leaves, whether they are on a tree, shrub or a tomato, will become brown and crunchy. Sad to say, that is not the only symptom; water shortage can look like any number of problems. It may be that a stem is noticeably barren. Sometimes leaves are not uniformly brown and dry, but rather have patches of dead tissue. The plant might be growing abnormally slowly.

A barren stem might be mistaken for an insect infestation. Examine that branch closely. Patches of dead leaf tissue might be the result of an infection by bacteria or fungi. A slow growing plant could need fertilization.

In the desert southwest, however, drought stress is often the more likely cause than any of these, and is easier to remedy.

How does one check for watering problems? Feel the soil. Is it dry?

Take a look at the irrigation system. Are there enough emitters? One or two gallons per day will not support a mature tree in a well-drained soil. Even a young one may need a little more than that. Water need depends on the trunk diameter (caliper) as well as the variety. A mature cottonwood, for instance, can transpire over 100 gallons daily. Usually the tree’s root system will extend through a wide area, but roots cannot grow in dry soil.

For landscapes in the summer desert, water shortage is an especially big issue. Take a look at the plants, and if necessary either add emitters, or start watering by hand.

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