

Turfgrass Dormancy

With any luck, you've caught one showers that have been so spotty over the region during the last few weeks. If you did, you may have a little bit of green in your lawn. If you haven't, that turfgrass may be suffering.

When heat/drought stress sticks around for awhile, it's easy to begin to wonder if the turf is still alive. Fortunately, our cool season turf grasses can handle some stress periods by going in to dormancy. Unfortunately, they can't do so indefinitely. In fact, a healthy stand can, at best, tolerate dormancy for about five weeks and still recover (struggling stands will likely be less tolerant of extended dormancy periods). Go beyond the five-week mark and even the crown can get dehydrated. At that point, crown death, and thus plant death, occurs.

Let's complicate the dormancy discussion even more. Lawns that received abundant rainfall this spring or those that were overwatered may have produced a somewhat limited root system. In these cases, unless that lawn is allowed to enter dormancy slowly, it, too, can suffer and die. If the lawn you are dealing with is one of these, allow the turf to enter dormancy slowly. Instead of watering every other day, water weekly. Then again after two weeks.

Once the turf has been in dormancy for that four to five-week period, it's time to get some water back on it. Do so by applying about 1/4 inch of water every two weeks to hydrate the crown. This will be enough to hydrate the crown but not enough to encourage weed germination and growth.

Remember: the turf can go too long in dormancy and experience issues as well. To determine if it is still alive, pull up a plant and separate the leaves from the crown (the area between the leaves and the roots). If the crown is firm and not papery and dry, the plant is still alive and should emerge from dormancy when rains and cooler weather return.

Emergence from dormancy doesn't mean all is back to normal. Turf in dormancy means less canopy that can provide shade to keep weed seeds from sprouting. After heat/drought stress conditions subside, we'll likely see a flush of weeds that germinate and grow before the turfgrass catches back up.

Sidebar: How Much to Water a Lawn

There isn't an easy answer when trying to answer the question: how much water do I need? It's actually better to experiment a little.

Since we want water to get to an eight-inch depth, use a metal rod or wooden

dowel or long screwdriver to push in to the soil. It will tend to stop when it hits dry soil. Once you know that depth, water for 15 minutes and recheck. By knowing how much further water has penetrated, you can then determine how long you need to run water to replenish the profile. If water runs off before you get eight inches of water in the profile, spread out watering to allow it to soak in over a longer period.

How often should we water. During most of the growing season, once per week will be adequate. During extreme heat or on heavy soils where runoff occurs quickly, twice a week may be needed.