It is essential to irrigate the landscape in winter

When the temperature is below freezing, it can be easy to forget about the importance of keeping the landscape irrigated.

While the need for watering during the heat of the summer is obvious, it may not be quite as apparent during the winter. Gardeners shouldn’t turn on the sprinkler when the temperatures are freezing or below, but with Oklahoma’s constant shifts in the weather, irrigation opportunities do arise throughout the winter season.

One of the major causes of winter damage is lack of adequate soil moisture. This year is no exception due to the drought conditions we’re experiencing all across the state. Dry soil coupled with strong winter winds can cause havoc on a plant. And boy, do we know how the winds come sweeping down the plains.

All plants, but especially narrowleaf and broadleaf evergreens, use water during the winter. When little or no soil moisture is present, plants can become desiccated and it’s more likely root damage will also occur.

When the local weatherperson forecasts temperatures above 40 degrees Fahrenheit, go ahead and hook up the garden hose and do some watering. If the extended forecast shows a dry cold front coming in a few days, take the opportunity to irrigate the landscape when the temperature is above 40 degrees. Apply about half an inch of water. When we’re blessed with a sunny day, the heat helps warm the moist soil and the roots of plants. It also helps reduce the amount of time the roots are exposed to frigid temperatures.

Vegetation needs moisture below the frost line to survive. If moisture isn’t present in the soil, moisture is pulled from plant roots and forms ice crystals, which results in damaged roots. This often is referred to as winter kill.

An automated irrigation system certainly is handy in the landscape, but it must be used responsibly. Make sure the settings don’t allow the system to come on during a hard freeze. Plants can be seriously damaged if ice forms on them.

Keep in mind that it’s not just the plants that will suffer. Water running off the landscape in freezing temperatures can create a hazardous situation if the water freezes on the sidewalks and roads.
Homeowners who have had their sprinkler system winterized may want to consider hand watering with the garden hose and hose end sprinkler. Be sure to drain the hose and put it back in the garage or shed after use.

Although moisture is much needed in the winter, remember, too much water also can result in problems during the winter. Cold, wet soil can lead to rotting roots. Soil with more than ample moisture also may encourage winter weeds to germinate and flourish.

The best bet is for homeowners to water only every three or four week and apply only enough water to moisten the top 6 or so inches of soil. If the state does receive a nice rain shower, delay watering until the soil has dried out.

If you have plants in containers in a covered area around your home, such as under eaves or on a covered patio, they’ll need to be watered since they’re sheltered from the natural precipitation.

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