

DON'T DEPEND ON MOTHER NATURE TO WATER YOUR DROUGHT-STRICKEN TREES

Aug. 12, 2011 — SAN ANTONIO, Texas — With the Lone Star State mired in a record-breaking drought, the parched trees that dot the landscape can no longer depend solely on Mother Nature to quench their thirst.

Just like people, trees need water to survive. Without it, they can't carry nutrients up into their leaves or push the sugar they create down into their roots.

During damper days, a mature tree — a mighty oak, flowering magnolia or even a stately pecan — likely could make-do with just the rain provided by Mother Nature. But as she gets stingier and stingier with her watering can, that's just not the case anymore.

"We're seeing trees dying *now*, and the longer this goes on, the worse it's going to get," said Paul Johnson, a Texas Forest Service regional urban forester in San Antonio. "If you've got a tree in your yard ... it's stressed."

Watering is the single most important thing you can do for your tree during a drought. Without water, trees stop growing and drop their leaves in an act of self-preservation. As the drought worsens, so does the tree, making it more susceptible to a potentially-deadly insect infestation or disease.

"Trees are amazingly resilient so things look a little better now than I expected, but they're still under serious stress," Johnson said. "It's worth the investment in your water bill to avoid the very real cost of having a tree removed, never mind losing the shade and cooling effect and all the other things trees do for us."

The key is making sure you water the right amount, the right way, Johnson said, explaining that watering too much or too little can be just as detrimental.

Texas Forest Service tree experts have compiled a list of watering tips that can help you nurse your trees through the drought:

- Before you drag out the hose, check for and follow local water restrictions, which often are enacted during a prolonged drought. In San Antonio, for example, residents can water just one day a week during early morning and late evening hours.
- Well-established, valuable, mature trees should be watered every week or two during times of major drought.
- When you water, do so **deeply** — 6 to 8 inches into the soil under the foliage of the tree. Avoid shallow, frequent watering. You can measure the depth with a long screwdriver; taking note of how easy it slides into the soil.
- The easiest way to give your tree a good, deep soak is with a soaker hose or sprinkler system. A mature tree needs about an inch of water — or 60 gallons per 10-foot by 10-foot area — every week or two.
- Time your sprinkler or soaker hose so you'll know how long to run them. With a sprinkler, place an empty tuna or cat food can near the tree and time how long it takes to fill it up. With a soaker hose, curl it up inside a kiddie pool, let it run for a set period of time and then measure how much water is released.
- Young, newly-planted trees should be watered three times a week. During each watering, they need 5 gallons of water for every inch of stem — or trunk — diameter, which is measured 6 inches above the ground. So if your tree measures 6 inches in diameter, that's 30 gallons of water, three times each week.
- Water should be concentrated at the base of a new tree, which is why water bags are ideal. If you don't have access to them, drill a few holes in the bottom of a 5 gallon bucket, place it next to the tree, fill it up and let the water slowly drain out.
- Generally, a tree is considered established about two to three years after planting, but the ongoing, extreme drought is causing some older trees to struggle. Keep a close eye on any trees planted within the last seven years.
- Another option is to reduce your watering needs by removing plants that surround your tree. Grass and trees often fight for available water. Replacing that grass — especially around new trees — with a 6-foot diameter, 2-inch deep circle of mulch can help keep moisture on the ground and available to the tree.