



Pay attention to water management

The unseasonably warm weather and below-normal precipitation across the United States present a challenge in planning for wise water use in the home and in the field, especially if the trend persists. In the East and Midwest, water management for crop production, lawns and domestic use is often left to the whim of nature. This easy-going attitude may be sufficient in areas experiencing near normal rainfall. Unpredictable weather conditions and lack of moisture availability may lead to water shortages and consequently crop failures, so the need for water management for domestic and agricultural uses is critical. Overuse of water may contribute to increased water depletion from aquifers and streams.

Although its a little early to know how much fall rainfall will be received to build back moisture in the soil surface and subsoil, agriculture producers, gardeners, and others should use careful consideration before any fall tillage. Tillage of the surface layer allows for loss of moisture in that zone that may be needed next spring. Soil that has shrinkage cracks in the surface allows good infiltration of rainfall without extra tillage. Dry soil conditions in the fall allow for good soil fracturing with tillage to break up a compacted layer. Generally dry soil conditions during last fall's harvest and spring planting were not conducive for compaction. Hard soil may be simply due to dryness rather than compaction. Avoid the extra time and energy tillage requires unless a compaction problem exists.

Planning and implementation are fundamental to successful soil moisture management. Prior to tilling your soil or watering your lawn, inspect the top 6 inches of soil for moisture. Minimize the number of tillage passes or practice no-till farming to help conserve soil moisture. Mulch or crop residue left on the soil surface helps to conserve moisture. Apply fertilizer with caution under dry conditions, especially liquid fertilizers for lawns and field crops during planting, to avoid seed germination failure due to increased salt concentration and chemical burning of the lawn.

This article originally appeared on pages 185-186 of the IC-484(23) -- October 23, 2000 issue.

Source URL:

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