Proper Watering for Establishing New Trees

It's important to water newly planted trees properly. Both overwatering and underwatering can harm the trees, but overwatering is particularly destructive. There's no one-size-fits-all rule for watering, as it depends on factors like tree variety, environmental conditions, soil type, and irrigation systems.

One way to check if your tree needs water is to poke the soil as deeply as you can with your thumb. If the soil feels dry or compacted, it's time to water the new tree; if it's wet, then there's no need to water.

Overwatering can cause trees to fail in the first few years, so it's vital to avoid it. To determine when and how much water your tree needs, and if you want to be a little more exact than the thumb test, you can use a moisture meter. A meter that is at least a foot long can provide insight into the moisture levels deep in the root ball and the soil surrounding it.

When probing, If the top of the soil is wet and the bottom is dry, the tree needs deeper, infrequent waterings. If the bottom is wet and the top is dry, it only needs light watering to keep the top roots moist. Environmental conditions change from day to day, so your tree's needs will change from day to day as well.

A common problem that can cause newly planted trees to fail is when they are placed in a highly maintained turf environment. Such lawns often have multiple sprinklers that may overlap. If a tree is planted in the middle of the crossing paths of several different sprinkler heads, it can easily be overwatered, potentially leading to fatality. So adjusting the sprinklers in a way that they do not oversaturate the tree is incredibly important. Another thing to possibly avoid or monitor very closely is if you have drip irrigation going to your new trees. Often times the drip system is overwatering your newly planted trees and shrubs as well.

When the soil is too saturated for a prolonged period, believe it or not, the roots of the tree will stop absorbing moisture. Once the moisture that was already within the vascular system of the tree has evaporated through the leaves, it is unable to pull in more moisture through the roots. The leaves attempt to transpire and the roots' refusal to allow more moisture to enter the tree due to oversaturation leads to irreversible damage to the vessels that transport water to the leaves, eventually causing death of portions of the tree or the entire tree. Therefore, again, believe it or not, it's better to underwater a tree than to overwater it. Often, we notice our tree struggling and leaves scorching, and we think that it needs more water, when in fact the tree was struggling because it was getting overwatered.

In our typically clay-based soil, moisture retention is higher compared to loam-based soil. Checking soil moisture frequently for a newly planted tree is crucial for its early-stage success and a great way to protect the time and money invested in it. It is also important to remember that the tree needs to have moist soil through all of the seasons, not just spring, summer, and fall. Be sure to pay close attention to soil moisture during the winter months as well. Having a good layer of mulch is a great idea to retain soil moisture and soil temperatures, producing a good growing environment for the tree all year long.

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