



Winter Watering Decisions

by Marilyn Loser

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What crazy winter-weather conditions! Last year we had record snow falls on two days during the first week of January. This year, January temperatures have been at least 10 degrees F higher than usual and we've barely had any precipitation since the end of September. In fact, at 10.44 inches of precipitation from January through September, we were almost double the average of 5.86 inches for the same time period. Add to this the fact that we had record high temperatures or tied record high temperatures the last four days of 2017! I was away at the end of the year so didn't dance around the yard in shorts at 63 degrees!

The weather forecast for the next 10 days is mostly for highs in the 40's and lows above 0 (averages for this period are all below zero), but well below freezing. There is a small possibility of snow today; this is in contrast to last year when we had 2/3 in. of moisture by now and I was able to cross country ski in the park across the street. I will also note that we had a couple of nights of lows hovering around -30 degrees.

I am worried about the yard drying out too much. So, what to do now? The first thing I do is take a sharp, narrow weeding tool and jab it into the ground in a number of places in the garden to see how far down the ground is frozen. Today, most places are frozen about 3-4 inches down. In my warmest bed, it is frozen 6 inches down.

I first test areas where I planted bulbs this fall and perennials last summer. I tend to place flags or markers where I've newly planted so I know where to check. Most of the bulbs I planted were tulips so I planted them 4-6 inches deep. We (actually, my husband) didn't turn off and flush our watering system until the middle of December (much later than usual) when at least the top 1 foot of soil wasn't frozen. David Salman of High Country Gardens says, "By nature, a bulb stores a lot of water, which aids in its production of spring blooms." I believe our tulip bulbs were moist enough to make it through the frozen winter. I will check out the water/soil situation in mid-February. However, I will hand water more shallow bulbs such as crocus, grape hyacinth, and the tiny iris reticulata and danfordiae since the top soil is getting dry.

I wandered the yard just before Christmas and lightly watered the newer perennials mid-morning from a watering can. Some of their roots are within the top few inches of soil so can more easily dry out. I'll probably water them again in the next few days. They're dormant now so don't need much moisture, but I don't want the roots to desiccate as I've had happen in the past.

The trick is to water a bit when temperatures are above 40 deg. F and there is plenty of day-time warmth left so the plants can absorb the water. If plants are trying to take up water when the temperature

suddenly plunges (as it does here when the sun goes down), the plants' cells can freeze and burst killing or, at least, damaging the plants.

I have a small lawn and I keep the grass long, especially late in the year. In the past I've gotten some winter burn, but not since I've left it long. However, we haven't had this dry and warm a winter in some time. I'm hoping the long, dead grass will help mulch the soil and keep the roots from sun burn. I don't want to hook up a hose to water as that entails turning on the watering system and then draining out the hose and system.

I'm concerned about established trees and shrubs, but won't water at this point. The soil was very moist before Christmas. Deciduous trees are dormant so don't take up much water. If I feel I need to water, I'll make evergreen trees my first priority. They tend to have more shallow roots and require more winter moisture. All of my trees and most of my shrubs are well mulched so don't dry out as fast as they might otherwise.

This time of year is my garden dream time. As I wander around I consider what I will do this coming spring and summer. The only real work I do is prune shrubs and trees. In another month I'll cut back any foliage I left for winter interest.

“The lesson I have thoroughly learnt, and wish to pass on to others, is to know the enduring happiness that the love of a garden gives.” Gertrude Jekyll