

Q: I am worried about my landscape trees if water is restricted. What can I do to increase the chances they will survive this drought?

A: Keeping your trees alive is well worth your time and effort. Mature trees in landscapes are not easily replaced, and the shade they provide is instrumental in helping to keep those energy bills more reasonable over the summer. The following information is generalized — for specific trees you may want to consult a certified arborist.

Your first step should be a garden evaluation. Check out the general health of your trees. If you see dead or diseased branches, have the trees pruned. In general, landscape trees need a pruning check-up about every 3-4 years to remove wood that might become hazardous. Do not top the trees, or thin them unless needed to remove damaged wood. Pruning into live wood stimulates new growth which needs more water. If you have turf under the canopy of the trees, remove it. Turf roots compete with tree roots for water and other resources, and when mowing turf, your footsteps compact the soil, restricting root access to water. Scrape the soil lightly with a hoe, followed by a deep soaking under the entire canopy. If you are using soaker hose, water slowly until the moisture is no longer being absorbed. If you see water running off, then you have reached capacity. If you are using overhead sprinklers, you may want to water several times over the course of several days, banking the water deeply with the soil. Water until soil is moist down to a twelve inch depth. Check with a soil auger or narrow shovel to make sure you have watered long enough. Cover the soil with several inches of finished compost, topped with 4-6 inches of organic material mulch such as wood chips or shredded bark. Keep the compost and mulch away from the trunk of mature trees by several feet. Do this under the entire canopy of the tree, and if possible, for several feet beyond. Do not add fertilizer of any variety as fertilizers encourage foliar growth which requires ample water resources. If you have watered deeply, you may be able to go several months before you will need to water again, depending on the summer temperatures we endure this year, and the variety of tree. Trees such as redwoods and maples may need more frequent watering in order to survive. Trees such as our native oaks are likely to survive with no supplemental watering at all. If you are not sure what kind of tree you have, bring a sample into the Master Gardener office and the volunteers will try to ID it for you.