

How to Water Native Plants

By Trecia E. Neal



Are Native Plants Hard to Grow?

I am often asked this question. The short answer is no! However, patience is required.

The Three-Year Rule of Native Plants

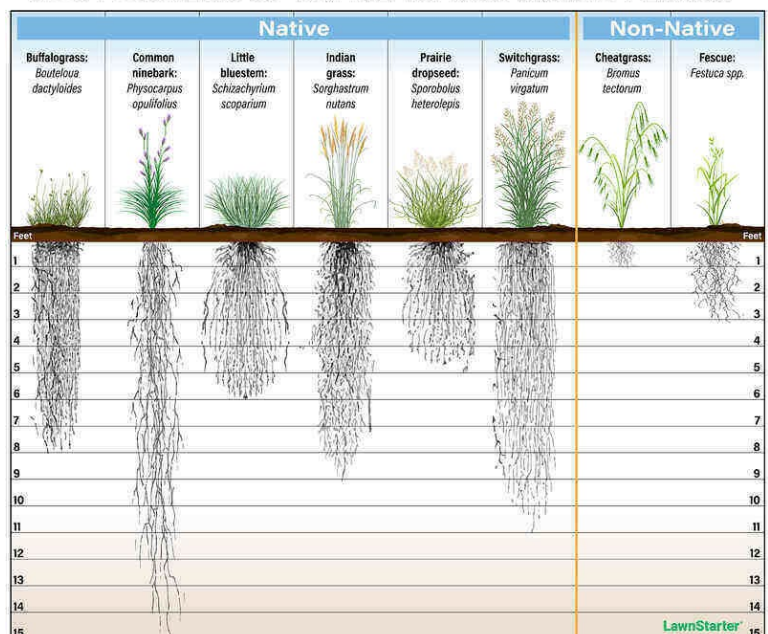
The First Year it Sleeps, the Second Year it Creeps, the Third Year it Leaps!



Native plants don't grow like the species that most people are used to purchasing for their landscapes. The majority of plant species available in standard plant nurseries and big box stores are from other countries and are often on the invasive species list.

This is because native plants spend their energy in the first year after planting, growing their massive root systems. Some native plants have roots from 3' - 20' deep into the soil. This attribute makes them drought resilient and able to absorb water that rushes across the landscape during rain events.

ROOT SYSTEMS OF NATIVE VS. NON-NATIVE PLANTS



When Do I Plant?

Installing new plants in your landscape in the fall gives them a better chance of success. This allows the plants to put their energy into establishing extensive root systems without the stress of photosynthesizing and putting out new leaves. Winter rains often provide all the water needed for these new plants, saving us energy and money on watering. Native plants act as sponges, soaking up excess water during rain events. When planting in the fall or early winter, the establishment period will run through that fall, winter, and spring, and usually will not require supplemental watering.

Plants installed in the Spring can still succeed but require closer monitoring and supplemental watering. These plants will need the spring, summer, fall, winter, second spring, and second summer to become established.

Plants installed in the spring will require the spring, summer, fall, winter, second spring, and second summer to become established, and this requires supplemental water.

Timing Is Important

Time your installation. An ideal planting day is cloudy with little or no air movement and 50% relative humidity. If rain is possible, try not to plant immediately.

See: [How long after a rain do I need to wait to plant?](#)

How to Water

The most common reason that plants die after planting is improper watering. Native plants prefer deep, infrequent watering; soaking them for thirty minutes every 7-10 days is much better than 10-15 minutes three times a week. The watering frequency will depend on your specific soil type, sun exposure, weather, and the age of the plants.

During the establishment period, water based on your soil moisture, not a timetable. It is helpful to have a soil moisture meter that will reach at least 4 inches down into your soil profile. Soil Moisture Meter Example

Ensure you understand your soil type (refer to your soil test). Heavy clay soil will take much longer to saturate and retain more moisture than sandy soils. This means that you will need to water longer with clay soil, but you must also slow the watering rate to allow time for saturation. Soaker hoses are excellent for this type of soil. If runoff remains problematic, adjust your watering to several shorter applications on the same day to achieve adequate saturation.

Sandy soil drains rapidly and dries out much more quickly. Check the soil every few days to determine when it is dry and repeat the watering.

Do not allow your plants' entire root ball to dry during the establishment period. Small root balls, like those from 4" pots or plugs, will dry out much more quickly and need more frequent irrigation than larger pots. Water smaller root balls when the top 1-2" of soil is dry.

If you water during the summer, do so on relatively cool days, below 85°F if possible. Be sure to check your local water restrictions. Watering in the early morning is recommended.

Signs of plant stress include dull or wilting leaves, brown or yellow leaves, and leaf drop. These symptoms can be caused by either excessive or insufficient watering.

To monitor water-stressed plants, check them in the morning before 10 am. If your plants are turgid and their leaves stand up without wilting, **they do not need water!** If you check your plants in the afternoon and they are wilting, **resist the urge to water them.** Recheck them the following morning; they do not need additional water if erect. Wilting in the afternoon is normal and common in plants during late hot afternoons and is not a sign that they need water.

Native Plant Watering Guidelines

1. **New Plants** – Water once a week for the first 1-3 months. The soil should be dry 1" – 2" below the soil's surface before providing additional water to the plants. Check your soil after thirty minutes of watering to a depth of 3-4 inches. If the soil profile is wet down to 4 inches, stop watering. Use a finger or a soil knife to check that the water has penetrated at least 4 inches below the soil's surface.
2. **Plants 3-24 months old** – water once to twice a month. Continue to check your plants in the morning for water stress.
3. **Plants two years and older** - watering is species dependent and based on morning signs of stress.



Soil Knife

Deep Soak

Sometimes, once established, a deep soak is beneficial for plants. Use the "pulse irrigation" technique to apply approximately 0.5 – 0.75" per day in early mornings for 2 – 3 consecutive days.

For most sprinkler systems, you would run the sprinklers approximately 40 minutes each day.

You won't need to do this again for about 3 weeks, though the interval could range from 2 to 4 weeks depending on weather, soil, garden maturity, exposure, and many factors.

The aim is to infrequently but thoroughly saturate the soil to a depth of 14 to 20 inches. Water in anticipation of extreme heat events, ideally during early mornings on cooler, overcast summer days. This method places moisture where roots can access it when needed. Avoid watering during the heat of the day.

Refreshing Sprinkle

This method waters the plants and the soil surface only and is best performed by hand. At the end of the day, during the summer around 7:30 pm, go out into the garden and wet the plants using a spray nozzle attached to your garden hose. The purpose is to dampen the surface of the leaves as well as the soil.