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Water limits = brown lawn?

Not necessarily, N.C. State researcher says

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Alan Rogers

Groundskeepers Ray Webb (left) and Justin Keller hose down the infield of L.P. Frans Stadium before a game between the Hickory Crawdads and the Rome Braves on Sunday. Researchers at N.C. State University say your yard doesn't have to look as brown and desolate as the infield at the ballpark. Homeowners have a number of techniques and technology to help conserve water and keep their lawns green.

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By **Dee Henry** | Hickory Daily Record
Published: August 4, 2008

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NEWTON - Homeowners may not realize it, but they have a number of techniques and technology to help them conserve water and keep their lawns green.

N.C. State University Associate Professor Dan Bowman, who, along with Drs. Charles Peacock and Garry Grabow and Grady Miller, all with the university, has been testing different kinds of grass to determine which are better bets to survive a drought and various equipment to help homeowners know when and how much to water their lawns.

The studies use a 500-square-foot field. That property is sectioned into 40-plot areas, each using different watering methods to determine the best one.

First some good news — the color brown does not necessarily mean your grass is dead.

"If you are allowed to irrigate your lawn at lease twice a week, it will not die," said Bowman. "It may not look good, but it isn't dead."

Bowman said most types of grasses have the ability to "go to sleep," kind of like a hibernation period, in which they can survive weeks, or even months, without water.

Bowman cites some tall fescue grass on his property that he did not irrigate for four to six weeks.

"And 90 percent of it came back and looks good," he said. "So don't worry if your lawn starts to look dead. If you can get some water on it, it'll come back."

He mentions Bermuda and zoysia grasses as being particularly hardy because of their long roots.

Those roots are always proportional to the height of the grass, said Environmental and Natural Resources Agent for the N.C. Cooperative Extension in Catawba County Kelly Groves.

"If you mow your grass short, it encourages the grass to have a shorter root,"

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Groves said, adding the best height for grass is about 3 1/2 inches. "When roots grow deeper in the soil, they can get to the water better."

Groves gave other tips, such as choosing grasses better equipped to withstand dry conditions and be proactive about the lawn.

"Fertilize grass in the fall and early spring so it's as healthy as possible going into the summer," she said.

Bowman's research has two focal points — conditions above the ground, such as wind speed and light, and conditions in the soil itself.

The first study uses a computer to determine how much water the plants need in various conditions. This system is more appropriate for a golf course rather than a homeowner, but is the best way to knowing a turf's needs from day-to-day.

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He adds some companies are marketing the system to homeowners, sending them information through a satellite-data system.

The second type of system acts as an automated water system, with an artificial root that monitors conditions in the soil itself. When conditions read dry, the "root" sends signals to turn on the irrigation system.

"The one drawback of this system is that it is fairly costly. It's not something a homeowner can go to Home Depot and pick up," Bowman said.

He adds there are some less expensive "rain switches" on the market that operate in much the same way as the more costly ones.

NCSU also offers an online service — the Turf Irrigation Management System, or TIMS, (found at www.turffiles.ncsu.edu/tims), a joint effort between the university's Department of Crop Science and State Climate Office of North Carolina at NCSU.

"The service uses weather information to calculate how much water the homeowner needs to use," Bowman said, predicting a 25 percent savings in the amount of water used.

The service is free, but requires registration through the Web site.

BY THE NUMBERS

48 - Counties under the moderate drought classification

24 -Counties, including Catawba, Burke, Caldwell and Gaston, are classified as areas experiencing exceptional drought

14 - Counties, including Alexander and Iredell, under the extreme drought classification

8 - Counties classified as severe drought areas

6 - Counties classified as abnormally dry areas

SOURCE: www.ncdrought.org

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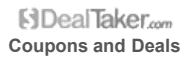
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