

Watering New Tree Plantings

When planning a new tree planting, one of the things you should be considering is how you will water your trees. New tree plantings tend to do best if they're watered during the first week after planting, and again each week to ten days of the season if they aren't getting enough by natural rain. NRCS recommends 5 gallons per tree per week for the first growing season after planting, and 10 gallons per tree every two weeks for at least two years after that. A good rule of thumb is to water at least every ten days if it hasn't rained. Water until the soil is moist, not saturated; a long, slow soaking is better than multiple short doses of water.

Controlling competing weeds also helps young trees get enough water. Control competing vegetation within a 3-ft radius of the tree or 3-ft strip on each side of the row, including the weeds in the planting hole. If not using weed barrier fabric, try wood chip mulch, but be sure not to pile it up against the stem of the tree. Try to remove sod-forming grass (especially smooth brome) in the planting area. Consider planting warm-season grasses between the rows and keep the grass mowed (this would also help established windbreaks).

There are several methods of getting water to your trees. One of the most common is a portable water tank on an ATV or pickup. We've also seen plantings where the owners have set a bucket next to each tree with a small hole in the side for slow release. Others have set up drip irrigation systems with tubing and nozzles by each tree (see Photos 1-7). It's up to you to decide what works best in your situation.

Older Trees

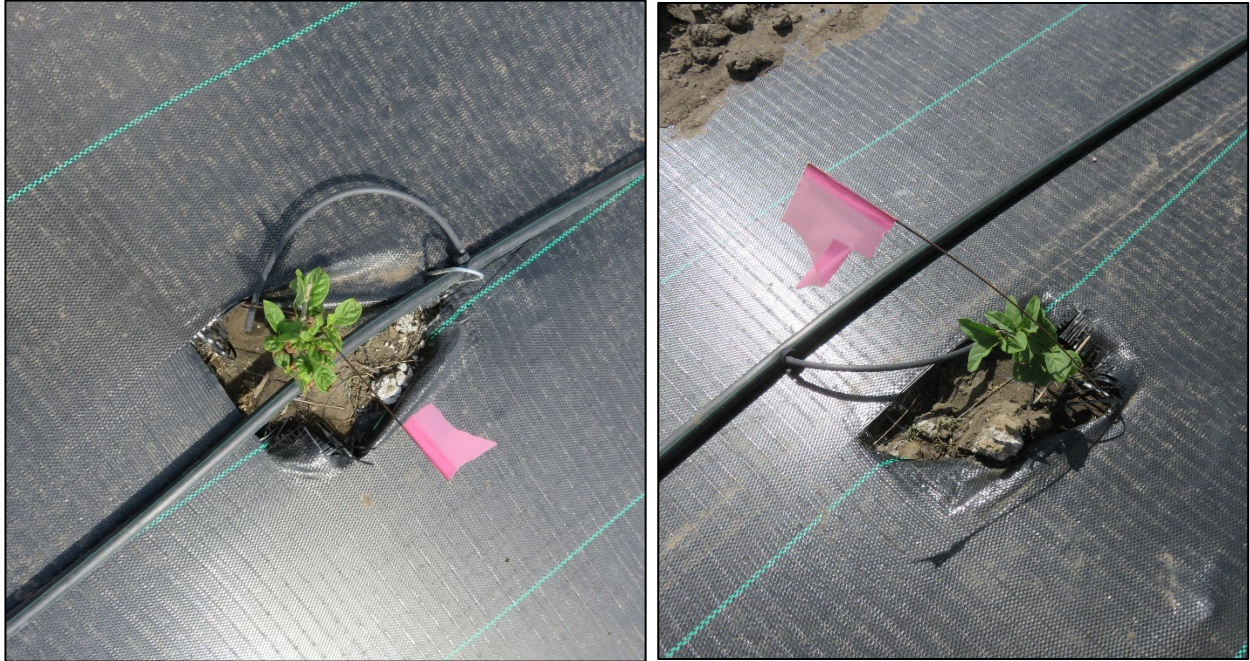
In drought conditions, older trees may also need watering, particularly highly valued trees in the yard. Signs of drought stress include leaves wilting, scorching, yellowing, or turning fall colors much too early. A sparse canopy of undersized leaves or dropping of leaves might also be seen. Trees stressed by drought also become more susceptible to disease and pests.

If supplemental watering is needed, water the whole root zone at least out to the drip line, not just the base of the tree. In fact, stay a few inches away from the trunk of the tree rather than getting it wet. Another option for larger trees showing signs of drought stress is to use slow-release water bags (see Photo 8 for one example).

Again, reducing competition for water helps. When using organic mulch like wood chips, make it 2-4 inches deep but keep it 3-6 inches away from the base of the tree. Mulch can be extended as far out as the drip line if desired. Mow grass around the trees. You could also choose to kill grass and weeds by spraying or by cultivating to a depth of one inch, being careful with either method not to damage the trees or tree roots.



Photos 1-4: Some options for nozzles on drip irrigation tubing.



Photos 5 and 6: Examples of an irrigation system with extension tubes on the nozzles.



Photo 7: Example of a shut-off valve for an irrigation system on a newly planted tree belt.



Photo 8: Example of a slow-release watering bag for larger trees.