



## Las Campanas Water Cooperative

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

### **Informational Bulletin #1 2018 / Winter Watering – Yes or No?**

*February 20, 2018*

**Note from the Las Campanas Water & Sewer Cooperative Committee (Committee):** Earlier this month the Committee distributed its first newsletter which focused on the need to pursue water sustainability. The Committee will continue to provide the Las Campanas community with quarterly newsletters on topics that will hopefully help us to meet the challenges of utilizing water in a responsible manner. In addition to the quarterly newsletters, we will also provide issue-specific bulletins throughout the year. Our first bulletin is dedicated to the subject of winter watering and offers insights into the why it is important to water certain plant and trees during the winter months as well as tips on what to water and how to water.

**Winter Watering:** You might be surprised to learn that in a winter when there is very little snowfall it is important to water some, but not all, of your plants and trees. Root systems are active any time the soil temperature is above 34 degrees F. In an average winter the soil in Santa Fe doesn't freeze here until late December or early January. Even then, it may only freeze down a few inches, so keeping some moisture in the root system of certain plants and trees is important. Before the recent changes to our climate we used to have snow cover in Santa Fe throughout most of the winter. Typically, snowfall amounted to an average of about an inch of precipitation per month (note: it takes about 10"-12" of snow to create one inch of water). The snow cover kept moisture in the ground by reflecting sunlight and keeping the soil frozen on top. In addition, the snow added moisture to the soil as it melted. This moisture kept plants hydrated as they came out of dormancy into our windy and dry spring and early summer weather.

***When faced with a warm and relatively dry winter what and how should you water?*** Water-use by deciduous (leafy) plants and perennials is greatly reduced when the plants and trees go dormant in the winter. Evergreens however continue to transpire moisture throughout the winter, making them especially vulnerable to drought stress during a warm dry winter. This applies to both needleleaf evergreens (like pines and spruces) and broadleaf evergreens (like Euonymus and Pyracantha). If you are growing evergreens in warm sunny areas and/or in sandy soils, you might need to water them every two to three weeks throughout the winter, especially if they were only planted this year. Evergreens that are desert succulents (agaves, bear grass, cactus, yuccas) are an exception and shouldn't be watered in the winter. Deciduous plants and perennials, and plants growing in heavily shaded areas and/or in heavy soils may only need to be watered once a month in January and February, and possibly March. In very shady areas where the soil freezes solid, water deeply in early December then wait for the soil to thaw out and start to dry down before watering again. Increase your watering frequency gradually as plants come out of dormancy and soils warm up in the spring. When soil temperatures and air temperatures warm up enough



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for plants to start putting out new growth, root systems will “ramp up” and an adequate supply of moisture in the soil will be critical to support the new growth. It's important to supply enough water to thoroughly moisten the top foot of soil in the root zone every time you water. This can take a lot more time than expected; it's helpful to find sunny periods expected to last for two or more days to water the garden. Try to water when the temperature is above freezing, preferably above 40 degrees. When watering established trees, be sure to cover the area under the whole canopy and at least a few feet beyond that, if possible.

***What can I do to more effectively water plants and trees during winter watering?*** If you have a thick cover of organic mulch, keep in mind that the mulch will soak up a lot of the water you apply; you may want to water two days in a row. If you are watering individual plants, it can be helpful to create "wells" around each plant to hold water and funnel the water to that plant's root system. A proven practice is to fill the well with water, go water something else, then come back after the water has been absorbed into the ground and fill the well again. You may need to repeat this pattern two or three times to completely saturate the root zone. Lawn grasses will green up in the spring and take off much better if they are watered at least once a month during a warm dry winter. Lastly, don't forget to disconnect the hose after watering and drain it. Though winter watering is not a chore that many gardeners enjoy, the benefits to your plants more than repay the effort.

The Committee would like to thank Tracy Neal for his contributions to this article. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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