



For immediate release:

November 7, 2006

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**CONSERVATION CORNER: FALL IS A GREAT TIME TO
PLANT AND MULCH, AND DON'T FORGET TO WATER
THROUGHOUT THE WINTER.**

submitted by the Office of the State Engineer's Water Use and Conservation Bureau

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) -- Fall is a great time to plant trees, shrubs and most perennial plants. Although trees, shrubs and perennials go dormant in the fall, the root systems of these plants still function until soil temperatures drop below 40°. Plants require less water to get established at this time of year because only the roots are growing and there's less of a chance of water loss due to evaporation from the sun or wind. With an increased root mass the plant will be less vulnerable to extreme fluctuations in temperature, like the harsh conditions we often experience in spring and during times of drought.

Once the planting is done, it is important to mulch all planted areas to insulate the soil keeping it cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Mulches can help plants to retain moisture and keep weeds out, along with adding a decorative dimension to the garden. They can be organic such as bark, pine needles, pecan shells or aged wood chips or inorganic such as gravel/rock. Organic mulches are best used with plants that require more moisture and where richer soil is needed because they decompose over time and add organic matter to the soil. Gravel/rock mulches are best suited for areas planted with native or xeric (low water-using) vegetation because they can survive in poorer soils and drier, hotter conditions. Gravel/rock mulches can provide a conduit during hard

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rainstorms, allowing the rain to percolate into the soil better and can help with drainage as they eventually work their way into the soil. The use of impermeable plastic to underlay mulches should be avoided in planted areas because it deprives the plants of moisture and air. Woven landscape fabric underneath allows some moisture and air to permeate, but is unnecessary if two to four inches of mulch are used, which should be enough to suffocate weed seeds and still allow moisture through.

However, even when mulches are applied, additional hand watering may be needed to keep new plants alive and healthy throughout the fall and winter months, if there is not enough precipitation. Trees and shrubs may go dormant in the fall, but dehydration will kill the roots of these plants. If their roots don't receive enough moisture, trees and shrubs may not leaf out properly in the spring. Sometimes their leaves darken from the outside edges inward. Plants with dehydrated roots begin to struggle and show unhealthy symptoms after they have used all the energy stored in their branches, twigs and buds. New spring growth cannot be supported because the now-dead roots cannot supply the needed water.

Root dehydration affects evergreens similarly. As the roots dry out the needles dehydrate, begin to turn brown and may drop off. Bud and branch death may follow. Evergreen needles may also appear burned if the ground is too frozen to allow the roots to deliver water and the needles to transpire (give off moisture) on warm, sunny days.

In the absence of regular snowmelt or rainfall, supplemental water should be applied to all newly planted trees, shrubs and perennial plants on a monthly basis from Halloween through March 1. Depending on the region and the microclimate of the planting area, it may be necessary to water more frequently than once a month to keep the new plant's roots hydrated. A general rule of thumb is, if you can dig a few inches down in the soil with your hand and the soil is not very moist, then apply water evenly around the plant until it begins to runoff. Remember that tree roots extend out as far as the branches reach. Therefore, it is important to water to the edge of the tree's branches, or "dripline". Disconnect and store hoses in a warm, dry place and avoid watering when windy. Appropriate fall and winter watering will pay off in the spring as your healthy trees, shrubs and plants spring to life and require less water and care throughout the growing season.

The Office of the State Engineer is charged with administering the state's water resources. The State Engineer has power over the supervision, measurement, appropriation, and distribution of all surface and groundwater in New Mexico, including streams and rivers that cross state boundaries. The State Engineer is also Secretary of the Interstate Stream Commission and oversees its staff.

The Interstate Stream Commission is charged with separate duties including protecting New Mexico's right to water under eight interstate stream compacts, ensuring the state complies with each of those compacts, as well as water planning.

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