



PHOTO CREDIT: Laura Bellmore

People commonly take their longest vacations in summer and they generally remember to make arrangements to have someone take care of everything from their pets to the newspaper.

People commonly take their longest vacations in summer and they generally remember to make arrangements to have someone take care of everything from their pets to the newspaper.

But many people may neglect to have someone look after their plants and home grounds during their absence. And if you go away from home for more than a

week, you may return to find substantial damage has occurred to plants left unattended.

This is especially true for plants growing in containers – both indoors and outside.

The ideal solution is to ask a friend who is knowledgeable about plants to check on your plants regularly

and water them when necessary. Be sure to give written instructions on the needs of each plant or group of plants, since your friend is not as familiar with them as you are. But try not to make the instructions too complicated.

If the plants are going to be on their own, move those growing indoors



June 21, 2017



Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



away from sunny, bright windows, so they use water less rapidly. This doesn't mean putting them in a dark room since they still need bright, indirect light to stay healthy while you're gone.

Then right before leaving on your trip, thoroughly water all of your indoor plants. Even allow some water to stand in the saucers beneath the plants' containers – something we normally would not do.

Plants in small pots will tend to dry out the fastest. If you will be gone for more than a week, enclose these plants (pot and all) in clear plastic bags to retain moisture and reduce soil moisture loss. Plants in plastic bags should receive bright light but no direct sun, which could cause excessive heat buildup inside the plastic.

Plants outside often need to be watered almost every day during the intense heat of summer especially when accompanied with windy conditions. Place all of your outdoor container plants, including any hanging baskets, in a shady location near the northern side of a building or under the protective cover of a large shade tree or covered patio.

Group plants fairly close together because this, along with the shady location, will help slow water loss. And, of course, water thoroughly just before you leave on vacation.

If you'll be gone for more than a few days and you can't find someone to water for you, inexpensive water timers – available at local nurseries and hardware stores – can work very well when hooked up to an irrigation sys-

tem. A battery-operated or electrical unit attaches to an outside faucet. All you do is set the timer for when you want the water to come on (based on how often you generally have to water the plants) and for how long, and it will water your plants automatically.

It's probably easiest to use an oscillating sprinkler to water a grouping of your container plants. But if you wanted to be more sophisticated, drip systems also are available. With such a system, an emitter head, which is attached to thin, plastic tubing, is placed into each container. When the water timer comes on, the tubing carries water from a main line to each container, where the emitter allows the water to drip into the soil. Very little water is wasted, but it takes more time and money to set up this type of system.

In addition to caring for plants, you need to water your home grounds very well prior to leaving, especially if there has been little rainfall before your vacation time starts. A thorough, slow soaking will provide a lasting supply of moisture.

Make sure you mulch all flower beds, vegetable gardens, shrub plantings and newly planted trees, too. Use a 3-inch to 4-inch layer of shredded leaves, cypress mulch, pine bark mulch or other available mulch to conserve moisture and reduce germination of weed seeds.

Also water newly planted trees thoroughly by laying a hose with trickling water a few inches from the trunk and leaving it there for about 30 minutes per tree.

Flower beds and vegetable gardens are particularly vulnerable to drought while you are away. To water automatically, place either soaker hoses or sprinklers to cover various beds and areas of your landscape. Connect them to hoses attached to a timer at each faucet you use for irrigation. Set the timers to come on twice a week and stay on long enough to soak an area thoroughly. Also, set the timers so that each water timer comes on at a different hour; that way you won't lose water pressure while irrigating. And keep in mind that morning irrigation is preferred.

Be sure to water and cut the lawn before leaving, and plan to have it mowed during your absence, if necessary. Most lawns require mowing at least every seven to 10 days. Besides becoming a telltale sign that you are away, overgrowth is unhealthy for your lawn, and the grass will be unattractive and stressed when it finally is mowed.

Finally, any sign of active insect or disease problems should be dealt with before you leave, or you may return to widespread damage and expensive replacement costs.

