

## Calvin Finch: Save water and reduce your water bills

BY: CALVIN FINCH  
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS  
OCTOBER 21, 2016



*A blanket of live oak leaves serves as mulch around annuals and perennials. Photo: Courtesy Forrest W. Appleton*

If you want to reduce your water bill or are just interested in reducing water use as long as it won't hurt the landscape, consider the following suggestions.

Change your irrigation control from automatic to manual. Especially this time of the year, with its cooler temperatures and shorter days, lawns do not grow as much and only need water every

two or three weeks. If you only water when the lawn is dry, an infestation of brown patch fungus is less likely.

Once or twice per year (and whenever you discover a leak) have your irrigation contractor inspect your irrigation system to find and repair leaks and to adjust sprinkler heads to ensure they are covering the lawn evenly.

Change out the rain sensor every two years. They are inexpensive and do not last long. Convert sprinkler zones to drip irrigation if they are watering flowers, vegetables, trees or shrubs. Drip irrigation is much more efficient because it lays the water directly over the root system and not in the air or on the foliage. Obtain the publication “Dripline Gardening” by Tom Harris and Ron Csehil from [thehillcountrygardener.com](http://thehillcountrygardener.com) website to describe how to make and manage a drip system.

Limit watering of established well-adapted trees and shrubs to hand watering in the rare situation where they may need supplemental irrigation. Most prosper without irrigation.

Convert portions of your lawn to low-maintenance, drought-tolerant groundcovers and hardscape. This is an ideal time of the year to do the work. Visit the SAWS website, [saws.org](http://saws.org), to find plant lists, design suggestions and coupons that provide financial incentives to help make the conversions.

For new plantings, incorporate compost into the whole planting area (not the planting hole) to improve drainage and water-holding capabilities of the soil. The unique particle structure of organic material allows it to do both.

Cover the soil over newly planted trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables with mulch to reduce growth of weeds, soil temperatures and water evaporation. Shredded brush and leaves work very well. Pecans and deciduous oaks drop their leaves now and you can use the live oak leaves that fall in February. Use 4 inches of mulch.

If you decide that you are going to have a lawn on a new property or want to improve lawn success on an established landscape, make sure there is at least 6 inches of soil. Include 2 inches of compost with the new or old soil and the cost of irrigation water will be paid back during the first dry year.

Now through early spring (March) aerate and top-dress the lawn. The aeration creates channels to the roots for oxygen, water and nutrients and allows noxious gases to escape while it relieves compaction. Top dress with one-half inch of compost so that the organic material can infiltrate the grass roots.

For new plantings of trees and shrubs, hand-water them when the soil dries under the mulch. Another option is to string out a leaky hose for the establishment period (one to two years). The leaky hose serves as a temporary, inexpensive drip system to apply water to the new plant root systems. The key to efficient leaky hose use is to run the water at low pressure (quarter turn) for several hours.

*Calvin Finch is a retired Texas A&M horticulturist. calvinfinch@gmail.com*

**FAIR USE NOTICE** This document contains copyrighted material whose use has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. The Texas Living Waters Project, which is a nonprofit undertaking, is making this article available in our efforts to promote comprehensive water planning in Texas. We believe that this constitutes a "fair use" of the copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. If you wish to use this copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond "fair use", you must obtain permission from the copyright own.