What Does all the Rain Mean?

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San Antonio is approximately 10 inches of rain over our average rainfall for a year and the Edwards aquifer level is about 17ft. higher than the average for this time of the year. How does that affect our gardening now and this summer? It depends on whether the rains continue or stop.

If the rains continue, make sure you are operating the sprinkler system manually or that the rain sensor is working well. It is a waste of water to run the irrigation in the midst of all the rain.

 Weeds are everywhere and will continue to fill any open space. Some opportunistic weeds like horseherb seem to be a blessing for the deer and the butterflies but most weeds compete with our garden and landscape plants. I rely on mowing, the weed-eater and hand-picking to control weeds but there are also some herbicides that help do the job. Control Bermuda grass in the shrub border and flower garden with one of the contact herbicides for grass such as Poast, Grass-be-Gone, or Over the Top. For nutsedge use the contact herbicides Image or Sedge Hammer. In the lawn one of the 2-4D products for broad-leaf weeds will work. On all pesticides follow the label instructions closely.

With all the rain most plants are growing gangbusters. Some such as lawn grass, vegetables and flowers may be producing top growth without an equivalent growth of roots. Who needs roots to seek out moisture when the soil is saturated?! The problem with that situation is that if we get a period of dry hot weather the plants will be caught with lush top growth with a limited root system incapable of supporting the top. We saw that situation last summer, after extensive spring and early summer rains we faced 2 hot dry months in July and August. The impact of the dry weather was disproportionate to the short time that it was in place. Leaves dropped, figs stopped ripening, and lawns declined.

The question is, “what can we do to counteract the situation?” There are not a lot of good strategies. You can be aware that the leaf drops may occur and be relatively confident that the plants won’t be permanently affected. On a more active mode you can be ready with your drip irrigation and sprinklers to help the plants transition from moisture rich soil to dry soil. Fruit trees, roses and other plants that rely on drip irrigation must develop feeder roots at the drip point to uptake the water. It is too late if you only begin using the drip system after the soil dries out and the plant is drying out. Begin drip irrigation one week after the rains quit and the forecast predicts hot dry weather. To transition the lawn, start once per week irrigation 2 weeks after the rains end.

On the other end of the spectrum, some of our drought tolerant plants are suffering from soggy soil. Plants such as Texas mountain laurel, ceniza and iris that prospered in low spots during our period of droughty years may be showing yellow and dropping foliage. If water sits on top of the ground over the roots for long periods after the rain, that is not a desirable situation. Some plants may survive and others can be moved. Do not add fertilizer to drainage stressed plants, the salts add to the problem.

 Newly planted trees and shrubs are especially vulnerable to root rots due to soggy soil. Periods like this remind us why we recommend that well-adapted plants are planted in the native soil where they are meant to grow without filling the planting hole with compost or potting mix. The idea is to have a planting situation where the water can drain away from the roots just as fast as it enters the planting hole. The newly plant shrubs and trees can be moved to a better drained site or the plants can be replanted after the area is “hilled up”.