Homeowners still need to help their trees and lawns make up for a record soil moisture deficit to mitigate damage done by a dry fall and winter.

This week's wet weather is providing much-needed moisture to parched soils, but it isn't enough to pull the state out of its moderate to severe drought classification, according to University of Minnesota Extension climatologist Mark Seeley.

Water landscape trees as soon as ground is thawed

Drought conditions can lead to tree decline, pest problems, and permanent damage for young and old trees alike. "Dry soils get colder in the winter and freeze deeper, which can kill roots," explains Gary Johnson, Extension specialist in urban and community forestry. And dead roots make it hard for trees to take in water.

Even if damage was caused by the dry fall and winter, you can minimize its effects by keeping the soil moist but not saturated. In the metro area, the ground is thawed enough to begin watering now if you haven't already.

To check if your ground is thawed and assess moisture, push a kabob skewer or other metal rod into the ground. If the skewer can be pushed into the ground 8-10 inches, you can water. If the 8-10 inches is moist, there's no need to water yet. If the 8-10 inches is dry, watering is critical.

Water turfgrass thoroughly but not too frequently

Turfgrasses are about 90 percent water by weight, so low soil moisture is a concern. But Extension turfgrass specialist Brian Horgan cautions homeowners not to jump the gun on a lot of lawn maintenance: "Homeowners typically rake lawns after snow melt to prevent snow mold. This year, we have no snow mold issues. Until the grass greens and starts growing, doing extensive lawn care will do more damage than good."

Horgan says you may be able to care for your lawn as usual this spring, if we get enough rain to bring the situation back to normal. "However, if spring rains are not enough, you may need to bring out your lawn sprinkler much earlier than in the past," he said. Horgan recommends deep but infrequent watering to help turfgrass plants develop strong root systems.

Get more information on drought and the home landscape at www.extension.umn.edu/drought.