

Water: Conserve it, Capture it, and Keep it Clean

I recently came across a booklet, or manual, produced by the Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District in Kendall County a few years ago. I was struck by the title, “Water: Yours, Mine and Ours”, because it conveys the idea that there is only one water and it belongs to all of us.

One of the main ideas expressed in this booklet is that we need to establish a new “water culture”, one in which everyone considers water the precious resource that it is and acts accordingly in their everyday lives. The main points about this water culture are to: “Conserve it, Capture it, and Keep it Clean”. This alone would make a tremendous difference in how much water we use.

Here is a story about how water culture affects water usage. I grew up in the dry West Texas plains during the drought of the ‘50s, so I knew how precious water was. Leaving Texas for the first time to go to school in the Midwest, I remember being truly shocked one day when someone walked into the men’s room, threw a cigarette into the toilet, flushed it, and walked out. No one I grew up with would have done that!

Conserving water, just like conserving energy, turns out to be the cheapest possible source of water or energy we could have. The water we don’t use, but that is still available to us in the future, is free. The less we use, the longer the current supply and infrastructure will last.

I am sure everyone has seen the lists of things we can all do indoors to save water—not running water to brush teeth, shave, install water-saving appliances, etc. Since these are activities every one of us practices every day, these small savings add up.

Frequent washing of cars, driveways or patios wastes significant amounts of water. Maintaining water-hungry lawn grasses like St. Augustine and Bermudagrass uses much more water than native buffalograss lawns. Using only native trees, shrubs and flowers that grow here naturally requires much less water than many of the exotic species many people like to have.

So a culture of conservation and considering water to be a precious will go a long way toward ensuring we will have water in the future.

Capturing rainwater is another obvious thing that we can do that prevents rainwater falling on impervious surfaces from being lost to the storm sewers and causing flooding during heavy rains. Any amount of captured rainwater that is later used for irrigation, watering plants, filling birdbaths, etc., is that much river water or groundwater that is not used. The larger the rainwater capture system the better. And of course, it is obviously

possible with a little extra treatment to capture all of the water you use indoors as well as out of doors.

Another method of rainwater capture is to create “rain gardens” or capture basins which are low areas planted in native grasses and forbs where rainwater collects and pools briefly before infiltrating into the ground. This not only reduces storm water runoff but it also allows for the purification of the water that would otherwise contain chemicals that would pollute our streams.

In order to keep our water clean, we have to minimize the amount of pollution runoff from our lawns, fields, farms, and parking lots. Mother Nature’s way of filtering out these pollutants is for the rainwater to infiltrate into the soil and seep slowly down into local water tables and aquifers below, leaving the pollutants in the soil where microbes of various types destroy the pollutants and thus provide pure water for our springs and groundwater.

Of course, limiting the use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and other chemicals on our farms, ranches and lawns is one way to keep our water clean. Another way to remove these pollutants is to have a good stand of native grasses and forbs on the landscape and in catchment basins which maximize the amount of water that seeps into the soil, filtering out the pollutants.

So, we all need to adopt a “water culture” that considers water a precious resource (even though we don’t pay much for it) and makes conservation a way of life. Most of us used to smoke and drive cars without seatbelts, but we changed our ways—we can do it for water too! And we can work to reduce pollutants and prevent them from getting into the water supply.

Until next time...

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