

Saving Water And Work At The Same Time

As we are currently in the midst of a drought with no relief in sight, I am reminded of the fact that as much as 60% of municipal water demand in the summer is for outside use—watering lawns, landscape plants, washing cars, etc. A large part of this use is unnecessary and wasteful. Here are some ideas that will not only save water, but will also save you some work.

Driving around Kerrville I have noticed people mowing lawns that have largely gone dormant due to the hot, dry conditions. And I ask myself, if the grass has pretty much quit growing, why mow it? I think some of this is just habit, part of the weekly routine. But it is also counterproductive. Mowing frequently, and especially with the mower set to cut the grass short is harder on the grass and leads to the rapid loss of soil moisture.

Mowing less frequently, and especially with the mower set at a high setting, allows the grass to grow a little longer. Longer grass shades the ground more, keeping it very much cooler (30-40 degrees) and thus reducing evaporation. This means taller grass needs less water, and it requires less work on your part as well. Never cut more than a third of the grass during mowing, as doing so weakens the grass plant, including the roots. Also, allowing the grass clippings to accumulate, at least up to a point, also adds to the shading/insulating effect, keeping the ground even cooler.

If you happen to be at the stage of putting in a lawn, the most water-saving things you can do are to keep the size of the lawn to a minimum and to choose the most water-saving grass species. Buffalograss requires much less water than does bermudagrass, which in turn requires much less water than the water-hog, St. Augustine. The latter two are non-native and require fertilizer, whereas buffalograss does not.

Generally, watering is best done early in the morning.

Many of us who live in the country and thus don't have to worry about what the neighbors will say, have "lawns" of mixtures of native grasses, *i.e.* whatever native grasses happen to grow there. These "lawns" usually get mowed only once or twice a year, maybe 2" or 3" high, and in many cases, don't get watered at all!

Another water-saving idea is to use mulch on flower beds, around perennials, shrubs and trees. Mulch provides the same function as taller grass does, it shades the soil and reduces evaporation. Too much mulch can be counterproductive, however, because it soaks up too much of light rains which never reach the soil and during wet periods can support mold and mildew. I think one to two inches of mulch is ideal. And once the mulch is in place, there will be fewer weeds to pull, and less watering to do, so again, less work.

The installation of drip irrigation for your trees, shrubs and flower beds is another water-saver that is also, long term, a time saver. Drip irrigation (using hoses that are porous and allow water to slowly seep out) is more efficient because the water drips directly onto the surface of the ground at a rate that it can soak into the ground. This eliminates the evaporation in the air when sprinklers are used. I don't like the idea of automatic timers for landscapes because they can cause water to be used when it is not needed, but using a timer that will turn off the drip after a certain amount of time can be useful.

As one whose cars are perpetually dirty, I find it easy to forgo the habit of washing cars. During times of water restrictions, everyone can have a dirty car with a clean conscience. And we can all certainly refrain from washing driveways, patios, etc., during these times.

Of course, rainwater harvesting, even if it is just a few rain barrels, is the ultimate water-saving practice and something we should all think seriously about. That subject is a bit too complicated to discuss here today, but I will come back to it in a subsequent column.

Benjamin Franklin said it best, "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water". Until next time.....

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