

Is it a Drought Yet?

As this is being written, on April 24, at our house we have received very slightly over 3 inches of rain in the past 7 months! In a season when most plants need to use the most water to fill out new leaves and put on new growth, the ground is bone dry. Not surprisingly, the city of Kerrville has instituted Stage 1 water restrictions.

Ever since this area was settled by people from Europe and the eastern US, all people accustomed to areas of higher rainfall, it has been popular to view droughts as abnormal, unusual events and periods of average or higher rainfall as “normal”. In fact, droughts are as common as periods of heavy rainfall. The oft quoted description of our climate being one of drought, punctuated by periods of floods has some validity.

So, if this is the way it is, we should all accept it and learn to live with the droughts as well as the floods. The solutions are, obviously, to use less (conserve) and capture more water.

As a kid growing up in the drought of the ‘50’s, in a part of Texas that “normally” got about 15 inches of rain a year, I learned to waste little and do with less. I remember an incident I witnessed soon after I went away to college in the Mid-west. I was in the men’s room when someone came in, threw a cigarette into the toilet, flushed it, and walked out. I remember being literally shocked that someone would waste water like that.

There are things we can do inside and things we can do outside to conserve water. Some of these are easy and can be done right away, some are more complicated and are more long-term actions.

Inside, I am sure everyone has seen the list of things to do to conserve water; turn off the water when brushing your teeth, only run dishwashers and clothes washers when you have a full load, use a low-flow shower head and take “Navy” showers, etc. I know that some people catch water in basins or buckets from the sink or shower when they are waiting for the water to get hot and use it to water their plants. These are all small things, but small things add up if enough people do them often enough.

Longer term, whenever it is time to replace a dishwasher, clothes washer or toilet, replacing them with high-efficiency, low water use appliances saves a lot of water.

Outside, there are lots of things we can do, and as much as 40% of all water use is for landscape use. For established plants, it is almost always better to water deeply but less often than to water lightly frequently. Sprinklers of all kinds are substantial water wasters because of evaporation of the small droplets and, on windy days, some water

simply blows away. Drip irrigation for flower beds, shrubs and trees is much more efficient than other methods, and, once installed, requires very little effort.

Mulching all bare ground areas in flower beds and around trees and shrubs helps keep the soil cool, thus reducing evaporation and keeping the microorganisms in the soil healthy. Too much mulch, however, can capture too much of a light rain or sprinkled water so that the water never gets to the mineral soil where the roots are. An inch or two of mulch is probably the optimum amount.

In really dry times when lawn grasses essentially quit growing or even become dormant, stop mowing! Mowing too frequently and too short is very hard on the grass in hot dry weather and trying to keep it green under those conditions wastes even more water. When you do mow, set the mower at the highest setting you can, as taller grass shades the soil and reduces evaporation. Mow only when it really needs it, not just because it is Saturday.

Reducing car washing and other non-essential uses of water, at least in times of droughts, is certainly an easy thing to do.

Longer term, you can save water by reducing the size of your lawn (non-native lawn grasses are the largest water hogs in landscapes) and by replacing non-native water-loving plants with native plants. Harvesting rainwater for landscape use is an excellent thing to do, whether it is just a few rain barrels under some gutter downspouts or larger, more elaborate systems.

Until next time...

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