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## Be green about water by going slow with the flow

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

On the local green scene, water conservation doesn't make much of a splash.

Saving water has a tough time competing for attention here with recycling, food concerns, energy conservation, transportation and other hot green topics.

Dry spells like we've experienced this year, however, remind us that our region's famous abundance of water can evaporate. And since water use soars in July and August with lawn and garden watering, this is a prime time to go slow with the flow.

**Q:** Water still seems plentiful here. Is conservation really that necessary?

**A:** It may seem wetter around here than it actually is. Among the 100 largest U.S. metro areas, we rank 56th in average rainfall, according to the Seattle-based Partnership for Water Conservation. Mountain snowmelt helps our water supplies but fluctuates greatly from year to year. And some scientists say global warming has already begun to significantly reduce the snowpack.

Even when we have adequate water levels, which we do so far this year, using less water provides substantial benefits. You can easily save several bucks a month on your water bill through conservation, helping to offset recent local water-rate hikes. Water conservation also reduces global warming, since it takes lots of electricity to move water.

**Q:** Does a rain barrel help much?

**A:** The problem is that our iconic rain usually takes a vacation in the summer months, just when we need it the most. By July (June this year), the average 50-gallon rain barrel utilized for garden watering has already run dry.

A single rain barrel certainly doesn't hurt, but to really save water and money you need to collect rainwater from your roof with a series of barrels, or a large collection tank known as a cistern.

**Q:** Isn't it illegal to install a cistern in my yard?

**A:** Not usually, but that may depend on the size of the cistern and where you live. Local laws vary, and Washington state regulations about residential rainwater collection are so vague that proposed changes have been in the works for years. The city of Seattle supports the installation of cisterns and provides detailed resources on its Web site ([www.seattle.gov/util/RainWise](http://www.seattle.gov/util/RainWise)).

**Q:** It seems like the same old water-saving tips just keep getting recycled. What's new for the yard and garden?

**A:** First of all, try not to just tune out all the standard water-conservation wisdom, from mulching to soaker hoses to avoiding midday watering ([www.savingwater.org/outside.htm](http://www.savingwater.org/outside.htm)). Those tips keep bubbling up every year because they do the job. As with most other green endeavors these days, you have lots of effective choices and can select the strategies that work best for you.

The most encouraging new development in outdoor water conservation is probably the evolving public attitude about how much water the lawn and garden really need. It's become more acceptable to let lawns go brown, resulting in huge water savings since just one minute of lawn watering uses seven gallons of water. The increasing availability of native Northwest plants at local nurseries is another exciting new trend in water conservation.

**Q:** Why are native plants a big deal?

**A:** Since natives have naturally adapted to being dry in the summer, they don't need watering once they're established. Many native plants, such as snowberry and monkey flower, are strikingly beautiful and attract birds and butterflies to the garden ([www.kingcounty.gov/gonative](http://www.kingcounty.gov/gonative)).

**Q:** So what's the easiest way to conserve water outside?

**A:** Don't let runoff run rampant. Make sure your sprinklers are properly aimed, and water slowly enough so that the ground can absorb it.

The local Saving Water Partnership says 50 percent of the water we use outdoors goes to waste because of overwatering, runoff and evaporation. We can all do better. After all, no one wants to be a drip.

*Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services.*

*Reach him at [tom.watson@kingcounty.gov](mailto:tom.watson@kingcounty.gov), 206-296-4481 or [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com)*

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