

Homes & Real Estate

Originally published July 25, 2014 at 8:00 PM | Page modified August 11, 2014 at 5:53 PM

Smart, simple ways to conserve water outdoors

This time of year, more than 40 percent of home water consumption takes place outdoors. Although most tips for reducing outdoor water use have been around for decades, let's take a fresh look at how to make those strategies work in real life in our region.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

EcoConsumer

Water flows downhill, but water conservation faces an uphill battle in the Pacific Northwest.

With all of the green steps we're constantly asked to take — from recycling to conserving energy to driving less — it's easy to say "All right, enough" when it comes to saving water. Don't we have plenty of water here?

Yes we do, most years. For now. But we still need to use less water.

Conserving water can save us money and time. It conserves energy, as well, since the water we consume must get pumped, treated and sometimes heated.

Using water judiciously also helps prepare us for a future time when we may have less water available for a growing population.

Fortunately, water conservation doesn't have to be difficult, once you get in the habit.

This time of year, more than 40 percent of home water consumption takes place outdoors.

Although most tips for reducing outdoor water use have been around for decades, let's take a fresh look at how to make those strategies work in real life in our region.

Embracing brown

You can save a lot of water by not watering your lawn, or not having a lawn.

In the Seattle area, no matter how hot it gets, you can usually go without watering your lawn the entire summer.

Our unwatered grass lawns typically go brown in June or early July, but they will green up again in September or October.

Letting your lawn go brown isn't for everyone, and people shouldn't be judged harshly if they choose to have a green lawn for their kids or pets to play on, for example.

If you do water your lawn, avoid the use of weed killers and chemical fertilizers.

Those have more of a negative effect on the environment than using water, and you can have an attractive lawn without them.

It helps that the general standard for attractive lawns, especially in the Seattle area, is less rigid than it was 30 years ago.

Lawnless in Seattle

Completely removing your lawn works for some folks, but it takes a lot of effort.

Planting native drought-tolerant plants in the yard instead of grass can be expensive, but rewarding in the long run.

Water your drought-tolerant species during the first two summers after planting to help them get established.

Many of us have had native plants die their first summer because we didn't water them enough.

If possible, water plants in the morning to reduce water loss from evaporation. Evening watering is the next best option, but may encourage disease in certain plants.

Saving with a drip

Drip-irrigation systems in garden beds use less water than other watering methods, but the systems may cost several hundred dollars and require significant installation time and maintenance.

If you use a sprinkler system or individual sprinklers, make adjustments immediately when you see runoff on sidewalks or driveways.

Collecting the rainwater that runs off your home's rooftop has become popular, but you would need several rain barrels or a cistern to achieve significant water savings.

If you do decide to spring for an expensive cistern water-collection system, do plenty of research first, including checking out local examples.

Savvy car washing

Don't just let the hose run when washing your car at home. The soap and the car's greasy residue flowing into storm drains can cause problems. Going to a carwash is greener, since commercial carwashes treat their water and usually reuse it several times.

With "waterless" carwash products, you save water because you don't have to rinse, but they may not work well for an extremely dirty car.

Choose a waterless cleaner without strong chemicals, such as a citrus-based product. If you're not a regular car washer and a bird unloads on your vehicle, simply wipe it off gently with a dampened old sponge.

Although we might never face restrictions on home outdoor water use like those recently imposed in California, conserving water always makes sense, no matter where you live.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-477-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com



Free 4-week trial, then \$99 a year for unlimited seattletimes.com access. Try it

now!