

WATER CONSERVATION

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“Water Conservation” is a foreign term to many Oregonians, and it is no wonder since it rains here steadily for three-quarters of the year. Droughts are a very real thing though, even here. Population growth, greater water demands, and low rainfall is a bad combination, but one that we will just have to learn to live with. Water restrictions are a looming possibility, but why not try to conserve water *before* the problem gets worse. It just takes a little bit of knowledge, and a little bit of extra work. Your plants won’t necessarily suffer, and may actually benefit. Here are some ways that you can conserve water this year (or any year, actually).

Plant water-efficient plants:

When water is scarce, why not use plants that don’t mind? All plants require some water to get started, but there are some plants that get by on less water than others. We tend to take water for granted in this area, but people from drier climates have been following this principle as a matter of necessity.

Ways to deliver water to plants more efficiently:

Blasting your plants with water constantly will just irritate them and drive up your water bill. Yes, your plants need water, but the **method of delivery** is a good area to work on. High volume **overhead sprinklers** may seem easier, but they also waste an incredible amount of water. Some water evaporates before it even hits the ground. When it does hit the ground, the water volume is usually greater than what the soil can absorb, so a lot of water will simply run off and into a drain. And what water does soak into the ground will usually only soak in a short distance, which encourages roots to grow shallower. Shallow roots aren’t as efficient at seeking and taking up water as deep roots. The best method of water delivery is **drip irrigation**, which applies water at a low rate, but for extended periods of time. This allows the soil time to soak the water up at it’s own pace. Drip irrigation systems are close to the ground, so the amount of evaporation is low. And since the soil can take the water up easier at the slower rate, runoff is kept to a minimum.

Timing is of the essence:

Heat evaporates water, as we all know. So why water in the middle of the afternoon when the heat is the greatest? The best time is in the evening as the temperature starts to cool, or very early in the morning before it heats up. This doesn’t seem like much, but you’d be surprised at how much water you can conserve by simply eliminating the evaporation factor. It may just mean that you have to wake up earlier or go out and water later than normal, but it could be fun. You’d be surprised at how different your yard looks just by being out at different times of the day. You will see new things that you never knew were there.

Lawns of steel:

Lawns are really the biggest waste of water in the landscape. People baby their lawns and do anything they can to keep them green and happy, even if it means watering excessively. The truth is, a healthy lawn will need far less water than most people think. By keeping your lawn aerated and thatched properly, you allow water, air, and nutrients to penetrate the soil and aid growth. By watering smartly (applying water less often, but for longer periods at lower volumes), you allow water to soak in deeper, encouraging deeper roots. Deep rooted, well maintained lawns will, by default, win the neighborhood green contest. They will look better, grow better, and be less fussy about summer water than stressed lawns. And keep one thing in mind - most Western Oregon lawn grass naturally goes dormant in summer. Most people don’t want to hear this, but our predominant turf varieties are cool season grasses, which puts them out of their element in summer heat. The fact is, most lawns will turn a little brown in summer, but they never fail to come back when fall comes around. By dousing them constantly, you are usually just watering more for recreation than purpose. If you start the water early enough and keep your lawn healthy in the first place, you can keep a green lawn with a minimum of water. The tendency is to ignore grass until it starts to brown, and then water constantly until the green comes back in fall. The truth is, once your lawn starts browning, it is going dormant, and probably won’t come out of it totally until the weather cools down. The best approach is to accept the limitations of our turf grass, live with a little brown, and remember to try harder next year. Or take some lawn out and plant shrubs.

Mulch it!:

No, we're not talking about chipping your plants up. A good mulch can make a huge amount of difference in the effectiveness of your watering. Yes, bark is getting a little expensive, but so is water. You can also use fine compost as a mulch, and some people will use alternative things like coffee grounds or filbert shells. In some climates they use rock as a mulch, but that doesn't always work well here. The point is to put something on top of the ground that will a) act as a barrier between the soil and the air which seeks to rob it of its water and b) Hold moisture itself, conserving the water you put down. Not to mention the weeds you will suppress and the erosion it could stop.