

Smart Watering Techniques Conserve Water in the Yard

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With continuing water shortages, applying simple water conservation tips when practicing lawn care is beneficial for both homeowners and the environment.

Instead of developing high water bills or allowing lawns to be drier and discolored, compromise by working with nature. The most efficient time to water lawns is in the early morning, from 4-10 a.m. At this time, the sun is barely out, the temperature is cooler and winds are milder than during the day, so there is less water loss due to evaporation. Also try leaving clippings on the lawn after mowing as a good nutrient source as well as a way to keep moisture in the ground.

Another way to work with nature is to put out large containers to catch rain water for more efficient watering use later. But don't let water containers sit uncovered long enough that mosquitoes use the standing water for a breeding ground.

Conserve moisture by mowing Kentucky bluegrass lawns to 2.5 or 3 inches and tall fescue lawns to about 3 or 4 inches. Think about reducing the number of fertilizer applications or the amount of fertilizer applied so the grasses don't grow as quickly and thus don't use as much water. Otherwise, consider allowing certain turfs, such as Kentucky bluegrass and buffalo grass, to go dormant. When doing this, limit foot traffic and mowing on dormant turf and irrigate it if no rain falls for three weeks.

Design home landscapes so plants with similar water needs

grow side-by-side. According to Roch Gaussoin, Ph.D., turfgrass specialist you should group ornamental plants into low, moderate and high water users and water them accordingly, taking into consideration the time of year, actual precipitation and weather conditions. Also, try to put the plants in places where they'll grow and use water most efficiently, considering characteristics such as sun and shade, dryness and wetness. Planting native and adapted plants that are drought-resistant decreases the need for supplemental irrigation once the plants are established.

Surround garden plants with a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch to reduce evaporation and weed competition for available soil moisture. Soils can be amended with compost, manure or leaf mold to improve their water-holding capacity and infiltration of soils as well as plant vigor and health during dry conditions.

Water plants to the bottom of their roots. Determine root depth and water infiltration by sticking a screwdriver or soil probe into the ground. When pulled out of the ground, the probe should be moist—not dry or soggy wet. Then try to keep soil moist about 1/2-inch deeper than the deepest living roots or, if the root depth is unknown, 8 or 9 inches into the



Soil with water provides no resistance when inserting a screwdriver — where a screwdriver meets resistance is the depth of water infiltration.

Photo Illustration by Vicki Jeddicko, UNL Extension in Lancaster County

ground. Woody plants should be watered more deeply and infrequently to promote extensive rooting. New plants require supplemental irrigation at first—consider watering them by hand so they get enough water without all the surrounding plants having to be watered in the same way. When overseeding, irrigate lightly and frequently to accommodate the new turf plants' shallow root system.

Maintain irrigation systems by keeping track of the weather and the watering systems. Use empty coffee cans, tuna cans or other containers to measure the amount of water sprinklers put out and adjust the run time so it delivers the required amount, changing run time seasonally as plants' water needs change and subtracting any rainfall.

John Fech, extension educator says, "Once a month, inspect automatic sprinkler systems. Look for turf growth around the heads of the sprinklers, broken or damaged heads, clogged nozzles and other complications." Adjust sprinkler heads as plants grow or decorative items such as decks are built and start blocking the spray pattern. Make sure they don't spray sidewalks or other surfaces water will flow off of. When watering on a slope, run sprinklers until there is runoff, then stop. After three hours, water the slope again. Aerating soil in fall or spring increases infiltration.

Summer Blooming Perennials

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After the first flush of early summer blooming perennials, the garden often has a lull during the "dog days of summer." How about some new, rarely used perennials that provide color?

Many people are familiar with the perennial called Lamb's Ear, which is fuzzy gray and soft to the touch. Another member of this family is *Stachys coccinea* or Scarlet Hedgenettle. This plant

or deadhead the flower spikes to encourage re-blooming.

There are several very good Agastaches on the market. Agastache is a member of the mint family and will do well in our climate and soils. Try Agastache *rupestris*, Sunset Hyssop. This



Sunset Hyssop

plant puts on a show of orange and lavender spikes with a soft, wispy look. With a fragrance reminiscent of licorice, Sunset Hyssop gives a fresh, clean smell to the garden when its leaves are touched. It's also attractive to butterflies and other pollinators.

An often over-looked plant family in many gardens is the goldenrod. This plant is often accused of causing allergies, when in fact other blooming but less conspicuous plants are creating the problem for allergy sufferers. For a spectacu-



Fireworks Goldenrod

lar addition try *Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks' which is an appropriate name. It puts out graceful, golden-arched flowers and can be easily mixed in with other plants in the perennial border.

All of these plants are considered xeric, or water-wise plants. After establishment (which does require some supplemental water), these and other xeriscape plants will thrive in summer. Plants that have silvery, gray foliage or foliage with a tough or fuzzy feel can often be great choices for the low water garden.

GREEN ACRES

Some Other Factors To Consider



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Note: This is the final of a series of articles related to acreage enterprises.

Farm community. An active farm community promotes group learning, innovation and cooperation. Quality suppliers of equipment, services and information are more available where there is a "critical mass" of farmers. Nevertheless, isolated farmers can join commodity organizations and take other steps to improve their technical and marketing skills.

Isolation. If you are isolated, you must carry larger parts and supply inventories and, most significantly, you probably cannot contract as easily for custom farm work. Thus, you must have the ability and equipment to do all of the work yourself. This requires a much higher up-front investment in capital, time and skills. In addition, it will be more difficult to attract buyers for the crop.

Labor pool. Many horticultural crops are very perishable and must be harvested and marketed in a timely fashion. Access to reliable and productive labor can mean the difference between success and failure. Are you comfortable managing labor? Are you willing/able to supervise and do the additional paperwork involved with having employees? Can you pay for labor before you are paid for your crop?

Access to markets. This factor is crucial for the small farmer who must get a high percentage of the crop dollar to survive.

Summary

Small-farm operators develop economic vitality by:

- Having a passion for what they do.
- Watching their cash-flow cycle.
- Producing crops for small but well-paying markets.
- Utilizing diverse marketing outlets but understanding the costs of low-volume locations.
- Marketing aggressively and creatively.
- Searching out and using information to reduce production and marketing risks.
- Understanding there is a learning curve to new enterprises and not expecting to make any money for several years.
- Investing in good soils and water.
- Locating near a major population center on a paved road.
- Employing used (versus new) equipment and being able to do at least preventive maintenance on the farm.
- Using contractors to carry out some capital-intensive parts of the enterprise in the beginning.
- Matching work to the family's time, desires and abilities.
- Diversifying sources of earnings, including off-farm income, to produce a solid, year-round cash flow.

Small farms can be a springboard to significant business opportunities. They can be an incubator for skills and creativity. Many large enterprises started from very modest bases. However, there are significant risks associated with a commercial farm. Successful enterprises are exceedingly well managed and focused on a profitable marketing niche.