

WATER CONSERVATION AND THE LANDSCAPE

by Jeffrey Heid

If the term water conservation isn't already a part of your vocabulary, it will and should be very soon. California with its vast resources, both natural and man made, has a varying and finite amount of fresh water available to us. Nothing new, of course, its availability fluctuates with heavy winters and periodic droughts.

As our demand for water increases due to: more of us, more industry, more new landscape, how we use it is becoming critical. We have weathered past droughts, had voluntary and mandatory rationing and we have learned many things. A water conservation infrastructure has been developed in California that touches this subject in so many ways.

As a landscape architect, I can only speak from the landscape perspective. But there have been many changes and improvement in the last 10-20 years that speak to this issue. From the production of better equipment, the use of amazing technology and



creation of local and state government requirements and regulations. All geared toward helping us plan and utilize our precious water more wisely.

The problem is, it takes time, it takes money and it takes effort to change our ways of thinking. For me as a homeowner, I want my landscaping to look nice without my having to do much about it. The sprinklers turn on automatically, the plants are green and all is well. But is it? I need to be sure that I check

the system periodically to make sure that something isn't broken or that is still functions the way it should. There are common sense steps to take and this isn't just for us homeowners, this applies to commercial sites, industrial parks, schools, agriculture, median strips, gas stations, parks, apartment complexes, essentially everywhere.

Having a well functioning system is only a part of the equation. We need to manage our irrigation systems and our water use in the landscape better. We over water, especially lawn areas, and there are many square feet of lawn in California. It doesn't only apply to lawns, we need to evaluate how we are watering our ornamental landscape, the shrubs and trees. How a system and water use is managed depends on: plant type and water requirements, weather, soil type and intake rate, shade versus sun exposure and slope. We waste precious water every day and it's time we step up and make some changes.

It doesn't take much to make a difference, the hard part is changing our attitude. It is true that it's one more thing to think about and like you I have plenty to think about without adding water conservation to the list. But if we don't the face of California, the face of our communities and the face of our own back yard is going to change dramatically.

I am currently in the process of becoming a Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor. Sounds impressive, right, but much of what these skills are is common sense. Evaluating an irrigation system, checking problem areas and making corrections and repairs. An ongoing maintenance program is a start and an important one. It alone can save a considerable amount of water every day and not just water, but money. The other green stuff.

But it can't stop there, good water management is key. The auditor program goes beyond visually evaluating a system and making necessary corrections. With a technical process of actually catching water in "cans", a system can be evaluated as to its uniformity. Along with other data, good recommendations can be made to potentially reduce the amount of water applied without making drastic changes to the system or affecting the health of the landscape.

The landscape industry is doing its part in creating better and more efficient equipment for us to specify and use. Recently developed "Smart" irrigation controllers actually adjust themselves based on local ETO, or evapotranspiration rates. How much water locally is evaporated from the soil and transpired through the leaves of the plant. California has a series of weather stations, CIMIS, that provides this data on a daily basis.

As a designer, I also have a part as I create a design and prepare plans. Many choices I make are based on water conservation, either because I choose to do so, or local regulations dictate. These include the use of native or water conserving plants, reduced areas of lawn, better soil preparation, the use of alternative landscape materials (gravels, mulches, pavers), and/or the selection of better or alternative irrigation equipment (rain sensors, soil moisture sensors, smart controller).



We have many sources of information and tools at our fingertips. They all help in understanding how to do it, but the key is our making it important. The homeowners associations, city jurisdictions, property managers, you and I all need to use these tools, or find someone who can help us understand and use them, and we need to make it happen now, not later.

For more information call or go to:

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