

Water, Water, - not so everywhere!

We must admit that the recent rise in local water rates has gotten our attention. Further, we must admit that it is a reflection of reality! Another reality is that despite all that wonderful rain last week, we are still short of what is our historical 'normal', making drought-proofing our plantings all the more essential.

Loads of water-saving suggestions are floated about, both practical and pie in the sky. Rain gardens, rain barrels, porous paving, cisterns, plants on roofs – all of them centuries old devices that have become new again. Such small things, but imagine if each one of us did just one thing.

Simple math tells the story of water shortage: there is no more non-salt water than there ever was and there are many billions more of us who need it. Scientists are forecasting that 30% of the world's population will be sufficiently short of water by 2025 to cause all manner of political unrest, far worse than the western range wars in our own history. Another fact, which being such perfect folk we hate to hear mentioned, is that we are the number one water waster among 147 countries.

One problem is the leakage in the old municipal systems throughout the country that we never seem to get around to fixing. We are horrified when storms cause the sanitary sewer overflow to go into our beautiful rivers but when the storms pass so does the impulse to fix the old system. The relevance all this has to gardeners is that half of the 80 gallons of water per day per household used in our country is used outdoors.

Surely that figure is an argument for a rain barrel, but I have read that they are actually being banned in some states where they are seen as collecting for one's personal use a scarce commodity that should go into the local system. One can understand prohibiting a structure the size of a community water tower, but a rain barrel?

Shrinking aquifers are an old story in the great plains and other parts of the western states but with shrinking glacier and mountain snow packs water shortages are occurring in more regions. It is not all gloom and doom: there are as many solutions as there are problems. Some of them are as simple as front-loading washing machines and shorter showers. Other solutions, such as rebuilding wetlands, cleansing polluted water, ways to use 'gray' water, require input from people educated to do those jobs.

We gardeners often resort to cooling off the landscape by waving a hose about. It's fun to watch the sunlight dance off the spray. It's also less than sensible. A plant or a lawn needs an occasional soaking, not a sprinkle. Deep watering, done best by drip irrigation, results in deep and drought-proof roots. Sprinkling encourages roots to grow toward the surface making them vulnerable to both heat and drought.

Mulch everything to conserve moisture: layers of newspapers, leaves, compost, grass cuttings, will do the job, topped with pine straw or nuggets where aesthetics dictate. Because of the misty moist mornings in England we think of that country as having lots of rain. It is "rainy" but it does not get a lot of rain, rarely a gully-washer. To preserve that dampness, many English gardeners do not disturb the surface of the soil unnecessarily: they merely add to the top – leaves, compost, grass cuttings. Where there is no digging, the soil's bacteria, fungi, earthworms and such are left in peace to continue their fertility building work.

This technique can be used to advantage in this area. Any soil – sand, clay, loam or a mix of them, will be greatly improved in only a few seasons by consistent mulching.

ARE YOU ABOUT TO RETIRE?

The Master Gardeners offer you an invitation for learning, making new friends, serving the community, having fun. The Master Gardener program is part of the state of Virginia's outreach through Virginia Tech to invent the future, beginning in each community.