

## Water: the Old/New Problem

You may think after the April showers that arrived mid-May we are home free. Wouldn't it be lovely if the threat of water scarcity could be lessened so easily? We have largely ignored the injunctions to avoid wasting water that have been swirling around our ears for decades. In one ear and out the other as fountains gush skyward in deserts, as more states squabble over who gets to grab the river water first and hydrologic engineers and corn growers argue over dams and aquifers.

As the world adjusted to the finite nature of fossil fuels by searching for substitutes, a new shortage loomed. It may have been the explosion of population that has made the scarcity of water noticeably acute but those extra people are now part of the equation. This shortage has no substitute but a major impact can be realized by a study of ways to curb the waste of water.

One way that has been around for generations in other countries is the use of gray water. Gray water is defined as that water that is slightly used, such as that flowing from washing machines, sinks, showers, and tubs. It can be used to water roses and orchards, wash cars and garage floors.

I have read that there are millions of laundry-to-landscape systems in California homes and with long term droughts forecast for the southeastern US, perhaps that is one habit that will follow the winds, west to east. Of course what really makes this small news item part of the future is that despite vast oceans, less than 1% of the world's water is both accessible and fresh enough for human use. It has been estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) that two billion of the world's people live in an area where supplies are increasingly inadequate.

Another way to conserve fresh water is to curb pollution. Pollution may be part of doing 'business' but it is not a necessary evil. Waste from mining, factories, and people can be cleaned up before being let loose on the nearest community. In Peru sheep and alpacas are dying. As the livestock belongs to indigenous people their leaders were ignored when they protested the acidification of their water supply by the tungsten mine. Eventually lives may be saved as human rights groups have heard them but you won't lose your dime betting it will be years before justice is done, if it is.

This small story can be duplicated worldwide and we can't perch on the high ground while we permit mountain top removal to pollute our streams.

A more curious way to conserve water is to pay attention to plumbing! Fashionable and frightfully expensive plumbing can send 750 gallons down the drain with each ten-minute shower. It is refreshing that bottled water, except for being sent to Haiti or for some emergency, has become unfashionable. That is twelve billion dollars each year we could spend on something sensible. It takes three times more water to make the bottle than the bottle holds. Now really!

Gardeners have their own ways to conserve water. By choosing perennials that tolerate hot dry sites you conserve water for those few that gulp it. Natives of course have become accustomed to grow on what chances their way but there are others that, once established, do not

demand frequent hosing. Some of those that do not require pampering are all sorts of yarrows, gaura, lavender, catmint, daylilies, ironweed, veronicas, stokes' aster, coneflowers, coreopsis, and epimedium. The epimedium is happy in dry shade and there is a new hosta, 'Sunhosta' that not only loves the sun, but also tolerates drought! It has white-edged leaves and is hardy.

Aside from containers, perhaps the plants with the greatest need for water are roses and lawns. Shrinking your lawn with tough ground covers such as junipers saves on fertilizer costs and mowing time. You may be amused to know that during droughts in the Atlanta area when watering lawns and washing cars was prohibited, there were soaring sales of lawn paint! It will be a long time before brown lawns are chic! Roses surrounded by a small mound of soil, can be watered by gently filling the depression without wetting the foliage or watering plants not needing to be watered.

Sprinklers are delightful to cool little tots but useless in a garden, hoses that leak or seep water at the root zone are more efficient.

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