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The California Drought and Landscape Water Use

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Landscape plants (trees, shrubs, groundcovers, lawns, and flowers) and the water they use are under unrelenting attack as the unprecedented California drought enters its fourth year. However, most of these attacks are misguided when one looks at the facts.

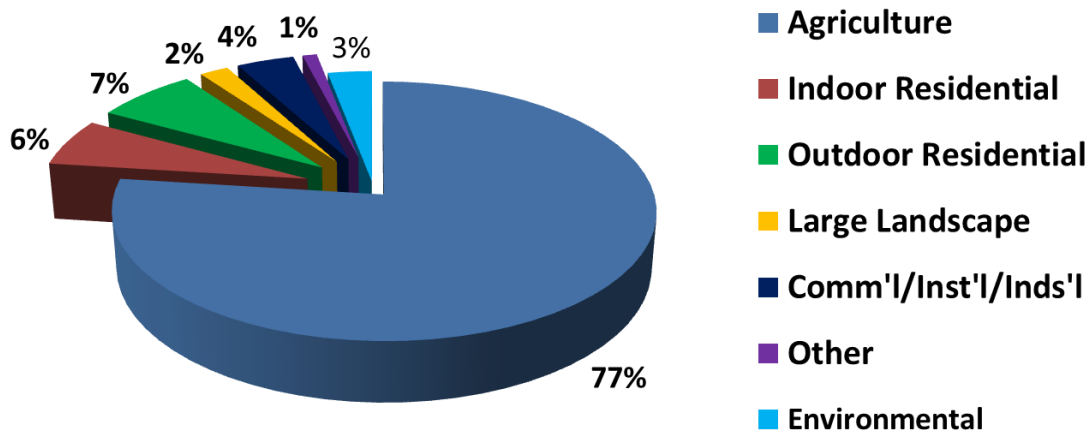
The Facts about Landscape Water Use

Landscape water use in California accounts for only 9% of the total statewide water use (**Fig. 1**). Yes, that's right, just 9%. Thus, if we never watered another home or public landscape, park, sports field, or golf course in California, the State would save 9% of its total water consumption, which doesn't seem like much when one considers the essential functions and innumerable benefits that landscape plants provide to enhance the quality of our lives and make urban areas livable. To name just a few, these tree, shrubs, groundcovers, lawns, and flowers provide:

1. Oxygen;
2. Carbon sequestration to help mitigate global warming;

3. Rain capture, dust and erosion control;
4. Shade and energy savings in heating and cooling;
5. Wildlife habitat;
6. Food;
7. Beauty and ornament;
8. Recreation;
9. Enhanced property values;
10. Psychological well-being;
11. Cultural/Historic value.

Figure 1. Average percentages of developed water use in California during a non-drought year (Sources: Calif. Dept. of Water Resources, 2013 California Water Plan Update Chapter 3. UCLA Institute of Environment and Sustainability, So. Calif. Environmental Report Card, Fall 2009).



Of that 9% of the statewide landscape water use, residential accounts for 7% while parks, golf courses, sports fields, and similar large landscapes account for 2%. Landscape irrigation is estimated to account for about 50% of annual residential water consumption statewide. That amount varies widely from about 30% in many coastal communities to 60% or more in many inland suburban communities.

What about Lawns?

Lawns, which have been especially singled out as water wasting culprits, are estimated to use 40% to 60% of that 9%, or just 3.5% to 5% of total statewide water use. Lawn grasses are classified as either cool-season (tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, ryegrass, bentgrass) or warm-season (bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, St. Augustinegrass, buffalograss) based on whether they grow best in cooler seasons (fall to spring) or warmer seasons (spring to fall).

Cool-season grasses, of which tall fescue is the most common lawn grass, are among the most water-demanding landscape plants. However, landscape water requirement research at the University of California has shown that, when properly managed and irrigated, warm-season grasses require 20% less water than that needed by tall fescue, so considerable water can be saved without removing turf altogether. Also, the research revealed that most woody trees, shrubs, and groundcovers, including those traditionally used in California landscapes, perform well with 45% to 55% less water than that needed by tall fescue.

Many water conservation strategies call for an end to lawn irrigation or removing lawn altogether. But remember that removing lawns will only bring water savings if:

1. they are replaced with no plants and the irrigation is turned off, which results in the loss of the essential functions and benefits of landscapes; or
2. they are replaced with trees, shrubs, or groundcovers and these are cared for and irrigated according to their requirements, which can be expensive if done well properly.

However, if water is turned off to lawns, many trees and shrubs solely dependent on lawn irrigation to meet their water needs will suffer, decline, and even possibly die. Declining and dead trees are particularly hazardous because they can readily drop large limbs or even the trunk can fail, causing serious damage to life and property. If one waters the trees that have lawns around them, the grass will likely survive although it might be of poorer quality.

Research has clearly shown that many if not most, common trees, shrubs, and groundcovers not traditionally considered drought tolerant or low-water use are actually very drought tolerant once established if cared for and irrigated properly. Thus, replacing lawns or other landscape plants with so-called drought-tolerant or low-water use plants, like desert or Mediterranean-climate plants or California natives, is unnecessary in order to reduce a landscape's water demands significantly and meet mandated cutbacks.

Three Basic Principles for Proper Landscape Irrigation

Adhere to these three general principles to reduce landscape water use:

1. **Improve irrigation system performance.** Fix any leaks; replace spray heads or other non-functioning emitters; align spray heads so there is no overspray onto pavement; clear plant material that is blocking emitters; and adjust, add, or move spray heads so that their spray patterns overlap one another 100%. Replace an irrigation controller if it does not have at least three programs; four start times per program; an offsetting that interrupts irrigation without losing the programmed settings during a rain event; odd/even, weekly and interval program capability up to 30 days; and a water budgeting adjustment in 10% increments.
2. **Improve irrigation schedules and water management practices.** Determine how much water your irrigation system applies during a typical cycle. Run irrigation systems between about midnight and 6:00 AM. Adjust irrigation system run times at least monthly. Many non-turf plantings will perform acceptably if irrigation is simply reduced 10 to 30% because landscapes are commonly over watered.

To estimate closely the amount of water your lawn and other landscape plantings require, see the irrigation calculators under the Landscape Water Conservation tab at www.ucanr.edu/cluh. Reducing lawn irrigation below the amount estimated in the on-line calculator could result in non-optimum performance; however, reducing the amount by 10 to 20% during the summer should enable a lawn to survive and recover or be reseeded in the fall or following spring if water is not restricted at that time.

3. **Adjust plant care practices.** Raise the lawn mowing height to at least 3 inches in tall fescue and 1.5 inches in bermudagrass or other warm-season grasses. Avoid pruning shrubs and trees. Fertilize lawns only moderately and generally omit fertilizing most other plants. Apply and maintain mulch.

If additional water conservation is needed after following steps 1 through 3, then reduce the amount of lawn to cover only the areas where the functions of a lawn are needed. Former lawn areas can be replanted as a low-water requiring landscape, if desired, in the fall or winter by selecting any types of woody plants or groundcovers regardless if they are labeled “native,” “drought tolerant,” or not because all woody landscape plants and groundcovers have similar water demands. Maximum water savings can be achieved when former lawn areas are converted to attractive, useful hardscape or mulched areas.

Landscape Plants and Lawns Are Worth the Water Investment

Many Californians consider public and private landscapes to be essential components and therefore their irrigation to be a beneficial use of water, but many state and local government and water policy leaders consider landscapes to be unnecessary or wasteful use of water. Landscape water use research over the last 30 years has clearly shown that we can have our landscape plants, including functional lawns, meet water reduction goals, and still have the numerous amenities functions and quality of life benefits that landscape plants provide. In other words, landscape plants are beneficial, justify the use of water, and a worthwhile investment, even in this historic drought. We have the science and technology to apply only that amount of water that plants need, no more, no less, and reap huge water savings.

Indeed, many of our colleagues in the landscape and irrigation industries have already and for many years been using the most advanced water and irrigation science and technology to schedule irrigations accurately to have healthy plants and still save water. It's nothing new to us. Even our friends in agriculture, which accounts for 77% of the total amount of water used in the State (we have to eat), have been using similar science and technology to water their crops accurately and save water. So already and for many years, a significant portion of the plant-based industries in California has plant-water use “down to a science,” and has been saving vast quantities of water. Others who have yet to adapt landscape water and irrigation science and technology can “join the bandwagon” and reap similar savings.

Priorities for Landscape Irrigation in a Severe Drought

Setting priorities during times of water scarcity are crucial. Here are some to consider:

1. Ensuring that public parks, school play grounds, and sports fields have sufficient water to maintain their landscape plantings and lawns should be a high priority. Children and young adults need to play and exercise on grass, not asphalt or dirt, and we all benefit from walking and exercising in a green, pastoral setting
2. Ensuring that bonafide botanical gardens and arboreta have sufficient water to maintain their collections should also be a high priority. These institutions have documented, curated, scientific collections of plants that have immense research and educational value. One wouldn't turn off the fire alarm and fire suppression and other protective systems at The Getty, so why turn off the water at a botanical garden or arboretum? Indeed, these research collections of plants have immense value. For example, the plant collections at the world-famous San Diego Zoo actually have greater value than the animals. It can be argued that the value of the plant collections at, for example, The Huntington in San Marino, is equal to if not greater than its art or library holdings.
3. Water the trees. Trees form the infrastructure of our landscapes and urban forest, and are their permanent or, at least, most long-lived and valuable components around which the other plants intermesh, if not depend. Mature trees are among the most valuable and difficult-to-replace plants in urban areas. Their loss would be devastating. Trees can be likened to the steel framework of a building; how could the building exist without it. So, keep the trees watered.
4. Limit lawns to areas that require its function as a recreational or walkable surface or where erosion or dust control is needed. Remember that lawns are relatively easy and inexpensive to install and established compared to woody plants and groundcovers; thus, if severe water cuts are mandated, irrigation of functional lawns could be greatly reduced or eliminated to allow continued irrigation of high-value woody plants and groundcovers.

Can We Conserve Our Way Out of the Drought?

California will be unable to conserve its way out of a serious drought by trying to wring out significant water savings from the 9% that landscape consumes in the State. Surely focusing primarily on water conservation that targets removing all lawns and severely damaging landscape plantings is not the answer. The official but unacknowledged statewide policy for the past decade has been to support the water demands of population and other forms of growth through conservation of urban landscape water use. This policy is a failed long-term strategy, however, because the water saved in landscape irrigation has been reallocated to meet the fundamental indoor water needs of increased population, which in turn has resulted in a hardening of water demand because there is less and less easily conserved water in times of drought.

Abundant, new, reliable sources of water must be found, other uses of water restricted, and/or, when faced with projections of 10 million more people in California by 2025 (as

reported in the media recently), growth must be mitigated; yet, never have we seen controlling growth as one of the options to address water use in this unprecedented drought. Politicians and other leaders and officials are ignorant of the facts about the science and technology of landscape water requirements and irrigation, and they appear to be out of touch with Californians' quality of life requisites. Crucial public policy and decisions on water use and distribution must be based on science, not illusion or perception.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cost/benefit analyses clearly show that landscape plants are worth the investment in resources, especially water, even in this time of severe drought. Landscape plants are worth having and saving. Through appropriate plant selection and proper management and irrigation, based on the science and technology mostly developed at the University of California, we can have our cherished landscapes, enjoy the innumerable amenities and benefits they provide, and, yes, still save water.