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Watering Words to the Wise

Less than three per cent of the earth's water is drinkable, but since most of that amount is frozen in glaciers and polar caps, only about 1 per cent of the world's fresh water is truly available for human use.

Water is a precious natural resource and deserves our best conservation efforts, especially in light of the fact that nearly 72 per cent of Texas is experiencing some drought, according to the U. S. Drought Monitor map as of June 30.

By definition, drought is a period of abnormally dry weather persisting long enough to produce serious imbalances in the distribution, use and conservation of water sufficient to have an adverse effect on plants, animals and people. Factors that determine the severity of a drought include the amount of rainfall shortage, the duration of the dry spell and size of the affected area.

The Western Climate Research Center, which monitors precipitation records across the nation, has five designations to describe the intensity of drought. These levels are: Abnormally Dry, Moderate Drought, Severe Drought, Extreme Drought, and Exceptional Drought. Kerr County and the majority of Gillespie County are suffering Extreme Drought, while most of Bexar County is in the grip of an Exceptional Drought.



Common cloud types include cumulus, stratus, cirrus and nimbus. This Hill Country formation has recently been dubbed "false hope."

Other than praying for rain, what can we do to conserve water without sacrificing our hard-wrought landscapes? Following are some strategies for where, when and how to water wisely.

First, when irrigating your landscape, pour or direct the water at the base of the plant where it can be quickly absorbed by the roots with a minimum of evaporation or potential leaf damage.

(Right now you're probably saying to yourself, what simplistic advice – water plants at their roots. No kidding. But I've been guilty of splashing the hose around in the past. Then I learned that watering flowers from the top down washes off their nectar – the nectar that sustains our butterflies and hummingbirds – and I realized this watering tip is simply profound.)

Drip irrigation systems are an effective option for delivering water directly where it's needed, and because drip irrigation is considered 90 per cent efficient, it is frequently exempt from drought restrictions. Routinely check drip lines for breaks and to make certain lines haven't separated from their connections.

Soaker hoses are an inexpensive, practical watering option with a couple of cautions. Do not connect too many hoses together (no longer than 100 feet) – pressure decreases over length making extremely long extensions useless. Don't run your soaker hoses at full water pressure; a lower flow allows the water to seep into the soil without generating run-off and an astronomical water bill. As with drip systems, check soaker hoses frequently for breaks.

Many communities have specific guidelines for using sprinkler systems. For example, the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) year-round, landscaping irrigation guidelines recommend automatic watering only before 10 a.m. and after 8 p.m. This seems a sensible restriction: the sun is at its strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.; watering then would result in more evaporation and plant wilt. If possible, water in the morning, rather than the evening, to prevent fungal problems.

If you do have a sprinkler system, make certain it is in optimum condition. Check nozzles and sprinkler heads for leaks or blockages. Adjust heads to spray appropriately, i.e., on plants not on hardscapes, and set the system to "manual" to control how much water is used. Sprinklers that spray water parallel to the ground instead up into the air lose less water to evaporation and therefore are more efficient. *Continued page 2*



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Hand-held hoses, buckets or watering cans may be used any time during the day except in periods of extreme drought when they, too, might be subject to restrictions.

No matter what method you use to irrigate your landscape, avoid wasting water. Any time you allow water to run off into a gutter or a drain, or you fail to repair a controllable leak, this is water waste and is subject to ticketing and a fine in some areas.

A few more thoughts:

- Mulching, at least 2 to 4 inches deep, helps minimize evaporation, as well as stabilizes soil temperature and reduces weed growth – all stress relievers for your plants.
- Consider harvesting rainwater. A house with a 1,000 square foot roof can yield up to 600 gallons of rainwater from a one-inch rainfall. Visit the Hill Country Master Gardener (HCMG) booth at the Kerrville Market Days the end of July for more information. Their team of rainwater specialists will be on hand to discuss methods of collection.
- Choosing native and adapted plants suitable to the Hill Country is always an excellent way to create a sustainable landscape. In addition to being hardy perennials, many natives are drought tolerant, insect and disease resistant, and down right attractive.
- Too, it never hurts to say a little prayer for rain.

(Knowing the vagaries of Texas weather, by the time you're reading this, we may all be treading water. Rain or shine, it's always wise to watch our water use.)