

Conserving Water in Your New Backyard Landscape

Contrary to popular belief, a water efficient landscape doesn't have to be "rocks and cactus" but can be lush and beautiful. *It's important to design your landscape with water efficiency in mind because landscape irrigation uses more water than all other household water uses combined.* The tips below will help you incorporate basic water conservation concepts into your design:

- Select plants that are adapted to your climate and site. Determine your climate zone. The "micro climate" of your backyard is also important. A Northern exposure generally receives more shade and is cooler than a Southern exposure. Shade from existing trees should also be considered.
- Minimize turf area to where you will really use it. Turf is a high water use plant, so unless you plan to use it for an entertainment area, sports or other purpose, it should be minimized or even eliminated. Many low water use groundcovers provide a similar effect that grass provides. Avoid planting turf in narrow strips, which are difficult to irrigate.
- Use pervious type materials for patios and walkways so rain can soak into the ground rather than running off. Slat set in gravel, dry laid pavers and decomposed granite are good choices.
- Test your soil. Use the simple test in this article or your cooperative extension will test your soil for a nominal fee. If the soil is either too clayey or too sandy, organics such as compost can be roto-tilled into the soil. This will help the soil retain moisture and improve plant growth.
- Group plants with similar water and sunlight needs. Low water use plants should be planted in separate groupings from high water use plants so they can be irrigated in separate zones on your irrigation system. Grouping plants into these "hydrozones" will ensure plant health and save water.
- Design and install an efficient irrigation system before you plant. Unless you are an expert or want to learn, it's probably best to hire a professional to design and install the irrigation system. Check the credentials of the contractor you hire (see web link below). It may cost a little more to hire a professional but you will save on your water bills.
- Use drip irrigation for shrubs and planting beds, and overhead irrigation for turf areas. New rotary nozzels are more efficient than traditional spray nozzles for overhead irrigation.
- Install a "Smart" Irrigation Controller that schedules irrigation based on the plant's actual water needs (rather than the traditional "Clock Timer" controller). Smart controllers use information such as local weather, plant type, and soil moisture to determine irrigation scheduling, providing the appropriate level of watering for each plant zone year round.

- If you are using a Clock type irrigation controller, each plant zone should be set according to its water needs. Your local water supplier or cooperative extension office often can provide advice on setting your controller. Irrigation should be done in early morning hours to minimize evaporation. Most importantly, don't forget to adjust your controller to irrigate less during the fall and winter when plants need less water.
- Maintain your irrigation system. Broken or misaligned sprinkler heads waste a lot of water. Check your system frequently. Adjust, clean or replace malfunctioning irrigation nozzles. Replace broken nozzles with the same manufacturer and type. If grass is blocking existing pop-up nozzles replace them with taller 6" pop-up nozzles of the same manufacturer and type.
- Use a layer of organic mulch around plants to reduce evaporation, promote plant growth and reduce weeds.

These tips will help lower your water bills and keep your landscape healthy. The web sites listed below have addition information on plant selection, irrigation and water wise landscaping.

San Francisco Bay Area friendly landscaping. Alameda County Waste Management Authority
<http://www.stopwaste.org/home/index.asp?page=8>

Water-wise landscaping nationwide and plant information/picture gallery California Urban Water Conservation Council
<http://www.h2ouse.org/tour/landscaping.cfm>

Design and installation tutorials for efficient irrigation systems www.irrigationtutorials.com

Consumer irrigation tips and how to hire qualified irrigation contractor. The Irrigation Association
http://www.irrigation.org/Rsrcs/default.aspx?pg=consumer_info.htm&id=140#3