Audubon International

Fact Sheet

Landscape Smart to Save Water

Did you know that outdoor landscapes put the greatest demand on our water supply, often accounting for as much as 50% of all water used for household consumption? This explains why your household water use (and bill) may double during the summer months.

Before

After

Winghaven Country Club in Missouri converted an area of managed turf, which was difficult and time consuming to care for, to an area that is now more aesthetically pleasing and requires less water and man-hours to maintain.

Getting Beyond Green Lawns

When it comes to saving water outside, lawns are a primary target. There are an estimated 25 million acres of lawn under cultivation in the United States (American Landscape and Nursery Association). In a drought year, homeowners tend to use more water than usual on lawns and outdoor landscaping instead of conserving supplies. With less rainfall to keep lawns and gardens looking their best, we rely more heavily on irrigation, placing added stress on already limited water supplies.

To understand your household's water use, look at your most recent water bill. Usage is generally measured in cubic feet of water, not gallons (1 cubic foot equals 7.5 gallons). So if you use 2,000 cubic feet during a four month billing cycle, that means that you've used 15,000 gallons of water. Some households may spike to as high as 8,000 to 10,000 cubic feet of water used—or a whopping 60,000 to 75,000 gallons—in spring and summer. If your water use is not measured on a bill, usage can be tracked on your water meter or estimated with a home water audit.

While many people enjoy having a lovely green lawn, a drought requires that we make priorities about what we value most. Can you tolerate a less than perfect lawn this year for the sake of ensuring that water supplies are adequate for all user needs, as well as emergencies? Can you water less frequently and more efficiently so that the storage in reservoirs can begin to be recharged? Can you alter your landscape to incorporate plants that require minimal or no supplemental watering?

The collective impact of day-to-day actions that each of us can take to conserve water can add up to significant water savings, meaning more reliable water supplies for the future and smaller water bills right away. Here are a few suggestions for saving water outside:

- **Evaluate what you have.** *Too much lawn?* If your yard is a sea of grass with few trees, shrubs, or garden areas, consider making a change in your landscape. A combination of lawn, landscaped, and natural areas creates greater interest and beauty. Plant diversity also results in greater wildlife diversity— so you can expect to see more songbirds at your feeders if you have a variety of plants. Once established, a more diverse landscape requires less

water.

- **Choose the right plants.** Some plants need lots of water to thrive, while others are hardy and look good with little or no supplemental watering. By making careful decisions at your local nursery, you can save a lot of water.

  Some of the best examples of plants that require less water are found in native prairies and meadows. These plants have adapted over thousands of years to thrive on little or erratic water input, and include coneflowers, blazingstars, coreopsis, black-eyed Susans, and asters. Many ornamental native grasses, including Indian grass, big bluestem, and little bluestem. In the Southwest, a long list of native desert wildflowers, cacti, and shrubs are well adapted to dry conditions. A horticulturist at your local nursery should be able to advise you about drought-tolerant plants that are best suited for your site.

Xeriscaping is a form of gardening that employs native or drought-tolerant flora species that are adapted to one's regional soil and climatic conditions. With a little planning, a xeric garden can produce colorful blooms from spring to fall with far less maintenance and water than a traditional garden.

- **Reduce your need for supplemental watering.** Select and group plants together according to their sunlight and water needs. Use your site plan to designate distinct zones, including:

  Natural Zones- Plants in these areas live on rainfall alone. Plants that are native to your area generally will be better adapted to your specific site conditions.

  Low-Water Zones- Plants in these areas will be able to survive primarily on rainfall, but sometimes may require a little additional watering in times of a drought.

  Moderate Water Zones- These areas will require regular watering and should be limited to focal areas, such as entryway flower gardens, vegetable gardens, and functional lawn areas.

- **Limit the use of annuals that need daily watering.** Hanging baskets, window boxes, and container gardens filled with annual flowers need almost daily watering. Perennials can go without water for much longer periods and may be a better choice in a drought year.

- **Naturalize part of your lawn to reduce water use**. Consider converting part of your lawn into a natural meadow. There may be a back corner of your yard, a hard-to-maintain slope, or another area of your property suited for transformation from lawn to meadow or shrubby area. This is a terrific way to save water, reduce routine maintenance, and add habitat for birds, butterflies, and other wildlife.

- **Use mulch.** Organic mulches help retain moisture, cool the soil, and reduce weed establishment when used in a 3"-5" thick layer. Mulch landscaped beds, borders, and gardens at the start of the season. If you buy, look for types of mulch that come from renewable sources and are designed to last longer, or consider making your own with shredded newspapers.

- **Improve your soil.** Dig some compost into existing garden beds and add a generous amount of compost to new landscape beds and borders. Compost improves the structure of the soil, enabling sandy soils to better retain moisture and keeping clay soils from hardening and cracking during a drought. Contact a compost supplier in your area, or start a backyard compost pile to generate a steady supply.

- **Accept less than perfect.** There's more to life than perfect grass. Many homeowners never irrigate their lawns. During a drought, it's normal for grass to go dormant (or "brown out"), but that doesn't mean the lawn is dead. Turfgrass is resilient and will turn green again with adequate moisture. Keep your mowing height high—about 2 ½ to 3 inches—to help prevent the grass from being over-baked by the sun.