

# BEST PRACTICES



## Use Water Wisely Outdoors This Summer

The climate of the Puget Sound region, particularly the precipitation pattern, is unusual among climate zones on Earth. Whereas most of the world receives its rainfall during the warmer part of the year, the Pacific Northwest receives most of its precipitation during the winter. Summers are the drier time of the year. This unique climate pattern is shared by the area around the Mediterranean Sea, so, often the Pacific Northwest climate is referred to as “Mediterranean”.

Our rainfall pattern ensures abundant water from fall through spring. Sometimes it feels as though the rain will never stop! Water becomes a precious commodity in the summer when our wet weather gives way to beautiful sunny days. These rainless days coincide with the growing season. Most yards here, including gardens and lawns, need to be watered in the summer to stay green.

Average water use on a summer day in Thurston County is 2½ to 3 times greater than on an average winter day. In the



summer, up to 70 percent of the average water bill is due to outdoor use. Over-watering not only wastes this precious resource, it is the leading cause of disease and insect problems for plants, and it can wash fertilizers and other pollutants into local waterways via storm drains. Using more water than you need also wastes your money!

### Follow these tips to use water wisely outdoors this summer

**Mow it high and let it lie.** Set mowing height to 3 inches. When grass is 4 inches high, mulch mow by removing 1 inch of grass and letting it lie. Grass roots will stay shaded and will grow deeper and more water efficient. The clippings you leave also serve as free fertilizer for your lawn!

**Use Compost** Spread a thin layer of fine compost over your lawn and rake it in to help retain moisture.

**Be wise when you fertilize.** Minimize the use of fertilizers. Synthetic fertilizers force rapid growth, which requires more water. A fall fertilization is all most lawns need for healthy growth. Slow-release, organic fertilizers feed the soil all winter and improve water-holding capacity all year.

**Mulch.** Add mulch to landscaped areas to keep roots cool, reduce weed growth and retain moisture.

**Water sparingly.** Most Northwest lawns only require about 1 inch of water each week, including rain. Use a hose timer to turn off the water automatically.

**Let it soak in.** Water your lawn slowly, deeply and infrequently to moisten the root zone. Turn off your sprinkler at the first sign of saturation, allowing water to soak in.

**Water early or late so it won't evaporate.** As much as 30 percent of water can be lost to evaporation by watering your lawn during the hottest part of the day.

**Water efficiently** Use soaker hoses and drip irrigation for trees, shrubs, planting beds and vegetable gardens.

**Choose the right plant for the right place.** Pick plants adapted to our dry summers and wet winters. Look for native plants or "water wise" plants. Group plants with similar water needs and water appropriately. Consider replacing some lawn with native or water wise plants.

**Let rain do the work.** If you use an automatic irrigation system, install a rain sensor to shut off your system when it rains. Adjust irrigation timers to match seasonal wet and dry patterns.

**Concrete won't grow.** Adjust sprinklers and hoses so that driveways, sidewalks and streets don't get watered. Avoid watering on windy days.

**Time your plantings.** Wait until fall to plant new lawns and ornamental plants. New plantings require more watering than established plantings.

**Be a leak seeker.** Check for and fix leaks in outdoor faucets, sprinklers, hoses and couplings. Often, all you need is a new hose seal, which are very inexpensive at any lawn and garden store, or many local water utilities even offer them for free!

**Slow the flow.** Garden hoses can deliver over 10 gallons of water per minute. Use a bucket and automatic shut-off nozzle when washing your car. Use a broom and dust pan, not a hose, to clean sidewalks and driveways.

**Be creative.** Wash large household items, such as cars or patio chairs, on the lawn. Drain fish tanks to the lawn or landscaping when cleaning the tank. Sprinkle left-over ice from a party on plants. Even your dog could possibly take his or her summer baths on the lawn!

*Source: Stream Team News, Summer 2013*