

Start Planning Now For Water Conservation

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's time we start talking about the gorilla in the living room that everyone is trying to ignore. We're still in a drought and it may be months yet before we get out of it. As such, many municipalities and rural water districts may have to go to mandatory water conservation. I for one am completely in favor of this.

We waste a lot of water in our landscapes. In times of prolonged drought and poor recharge of well fields (due to low river flows), we simply have to reduce the demand for water. Let's face it, water usage in cities in the summer is all about landscaping. I'll even point the finger and tell you that the big user is lawns. This won't make me popular with quite a few folks, but it's simply the way it is.

If rainfall and Republican River flow rates remain low, then we will need to make changes. We survived this in the late 1980's and we will again. We may have a lot of brown lawns before it's said and done, but we need to keep this in perspective. Even if a lawn dies, completely, we can get a new lawn started and looking good in just a couple of months. Also remember that just because you stop watering your lawn it doesn't mean it's going to die. There's a thing called dormancy and lawns can actually survive a certain amount of drought.

But how you manage your lawn can make a big difference. Start this spring by setting your lawn mower as high as it will go and then leave the mower set there. Longer leaf blades result in deeper roots and a more extensive root system. Secondly, if you aren't watering and the lawn isn't growing, stay off of it! Dormant grass plant crowns become fragile when they are dry and dormant. Excessive foot traffic and especially vehicle traffic on dormant crowns can crush them and damage them.

If we aren't on watering restrictions at the start of the grass growth season, change your irrigation schedule. Set it up to apply one good deep soaking per week. I'm stepping on toes here but daily watering of lawns is a waste. Soak the lawn once a week. Fewer irrigations and deeper ones also help create a more extensive root system. If we go into watering restrictions, don't start watering more often just because you can water on certain days. Invariably we see that happen. Homeowners that usually wouldn't irrigate their lawns, do so because they can on those days.

For landscape plants, trees shrubs, flower and vegetable gardens, use drip irrigation whenever possible. Sprinklers are very inefficient methods of watering. Drip irrigation is relatively inexpensive and you can set it up yourself. It applies small amounts of water right where it is needed. The water isn't blasted into the air where wind and high temperatures can evaporate it before it hits the ground.

Which brings up the point that trees must have a high priority if you have limited water resources. I already mentioned that a new lawn can be established in a few weeks. But a tree, a nice shade tree, can take 25 years or more to get established. Protect trees and shrubs first and don't worry about the turf! For flower beds and vegetable gardens, also work to incorporate a lot of organic matter into the soil. This will create a better root zone allowing for deeper root development and healthier plants.

Water conservation should be an every day thing. But we don't seem to think about it until the well is at risk of running dry. So start planning now, to conserve water later this year, whether you think we need to, or not!