

INVESTING IN WATER-SMART LANDSCAPING

Judging by our water use and consumption practices, many Americans take water for granted.

ABOUT 30% OF ALL HOUSEHOLD WATER USE IN THE U.S. OCCURS OUTDOORS.

More and more individuals are demonstrating their water smarts indoors by retrofitting their homes with WaterSense-labeled products. But outdoors, especially in the summer, the amount of water a household uses can exceed the amount used for all other purposes in an entire year. Gardening and lawn care account for the majority of this seasonal increase. Of the estimated 29 billion gallons of water used daily by households in the U.S. more than 8.5 billion, or 30 percent, is devoted to outdoor water use.

KEY STEPS FOR SAVING WATER OUTSIDE

TIMING IS EVERYTHING. Know how much water your landscape actually needs before you set your sprinkler. Your local water utility can offer recommendations and best times to water.

LOOK FOR THE LABEL. WaterSense-labeled irrigation controllers use local weather data to water only when needed. If your system uses a clock timer, consider upgrading to this smart technology.

GO WITH A PRO. Contractors certified through a WaterSense-labeled program can audit, install, or maintain your system to ensure water isn't wasted. Ask for credentials!

CONSERVE AND PROTECT. Mulching helps conserve and extend available water, protects the soil from erosion, reduces competition by suppressing weeds, and moderates temperature extremes.

MULCHING BASICS

Mulch is simply a protective layer of a material that is spread on top of the soil. Mulches can either be organic, such as grass clippings, straw, bark chips, and similar materials, or inorganic, such as stones, brick chips, and plastic. Both organic and inorganic mulches have numerous benefits. Understanding when, what type, and how much mulch to spread is critical.

Match plants to mulch type. Some drought-tolerant plants do not tolerate moist soils. Avoid using organic mulching with these plants. Gravel and shell mulches increase heat around plants potentially causing stress conditions. Other common mistakes include applying a mulch layer that is too thick and mounding a mulch "volcano" around shrub and tree trunks. Overmulching with more than about 3 to 4 inches of organic mulch can cause a variety of problems.



PROBLEMS CREATED BY OVERMULCHING

- Overmulching can create an anaerobic (low or no oxygen) environment that allows fungal diseases to develop in plant stems and roots (some are toxic to humans).
- Mulching too early in the spring can create water-logged soils that may kill drought-tolerant plants.
- In the fall, mulch applied too deeply can create a home for rodents which may feed on plant stems and trunks throughout the winter.
- Roots may grow into the mulch and not the soil.
- Slugs and other insects may colonize thick mulch.
- Thick layers of sawdust and grass clippings compact easily and may prevent water from penetrating the soil.



GENERAL RULES OF THUMB FOR APPLYING MULCH

- Do not exceed about 3 inches in depth depending on type (coarse organic mulch can be applied more thickly than fine mulch).
- Avoid compacting fine organic mulches.
- Avoid applying organic mulch too early in the spring or fall.
- Inorganic mulches should be used with appropriate designs such as xeriscape, rock gardens, and Japanese gardens.
- Place mulch a few inches away from the base of plants, not mounded up around it (particularly trees).

By following some simple rules, mulch can be an effective way to conserve water, add organic matter to the soil, and keep annual weeds from germinating.

Sources: USDA, USEPA

TAKING THE GUESSWORK OUT OF WATERING



WaterSense-labeled irrigation controllers are a type of "smart" irrigation control technology that uses local weather data to determine whether your sprinkler system needs to turn on. With proper installation, programming, and adjustments, these controllers can help consumers save water, time, and money when compared to use of a conventional controller.

