Water Conservation

It has been estimated that the average home gardener uses approximately twice the amount of water in his or her landscape than needed to keep plants healthy. Although this does not seem important with recent heavy rains, but water conservation is very real issue that many communities are dealing with. In neighboring Hoke County, water restrictions were implemented in June of 2008, are still in effect, and are being enforced today. Water is a precious natural resource that is most often taken for granted.

Conserving water in the landscape can be a very rewarding endeavor. Proper plant selection, site preparation, turf management, mulching, smart irrigation practices, and capturing rain water are all ways to be water-wise in the landscape.

Every plant has a place, and for every place there is a plant. Proper plant selection is the first step towards conserving water in the landscape. Select plants that will thrive in the microclimates where they are placed. Plants that typically thrive in shade should be planted in shade. If they are planted in sun, they will require much more water and care. It seems that each afternoon for the last week, I walk up my front steps to a wilted ‘Margarita’ sweet potato vine. I moved the planter it was in to take advantage of recent rains, but since then have not moved it back out of the direct sun. Because of this, I have had to provide additional water to the vine.

Many surrounding states’ residents are required to pay upwards of $10 to have soil samples analyzed. Here in North Carolina, soil samples are analyzed for free by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Knowing the pH and nutrient content of your soil is powerful information when considering planting and maintaining a landscape. Unhappy plants require more care, water, and time. If a tomato plant is having problems with blossom end rot, one underlying cause could be an incorrect pH, which in turn does not allow the plant to take up available calcium. In this situation, calcium can be added to the soil, but until the pH is corrected no change will take place.

Many people with children maintain a significant area of their property in turfgrass. A healthy lawn area can be a place to utilize significantly less water. There is a direct relationship between the height of the mower blade and the amount of water a lawn requires. The longer the grass blade is kept, the more shade it provides to the roots and therefore needs less water.
Surrounding most lawn areas, many gardeners are turning to mulch to provide water smart and aesthetically pleasing flower beds. Mulching is a quick, easy, and inexpensive way to allow more time between watering. Mulch acts as an insulator to plants by preventing evaporation and keeping water within the top 6 to 8 inches of soil where fine feeder roots are most prevalent.

So far, these water conservation steps are pretty simple. Plant selection, site preparation, turfgrass management, and mulching are all basic concepts that most gardeners already follow. Smart irrigation practices and rainwater harvesting are a little more work, but can conserve hundreds of gallons of water per month with very small changes.

Irrigation is a topic of many conversations everywhere. Who has a better system? Who has a more high tech controller? Men are well aware of their irrigation capabilities, but not always aware of how to utilize their systems correctly. Irrigation should only be run early in the morning, before 9 a.m. if possible. This helps to limit the amount of evaporation during and after the irrigation system is on. Watering should be done less frequently, but for longer periods of time to encourage deep, healthy root systems. Last but certainly not least, irrigation systems should be turned off during rain! It never ceases to amaze me that I can drive by my neighbor’s house and he has the sprinklers running 7 days a week, 3 times a day without a rain sensor to shut the system off in rain. All I can say is, I’m glad I don’t have to pay his water bill!

Finally, utilizing a rain barrel is a great way to reuse water. Rain barrels are easy to create and are great projects for parents and children to work on together. A couple of weeks ago, I decided I needed a rain barrel. The project turned out wonderful. The very first night I set it up, it rained. I was so excited the next morning that I watered my garden just because I could.

Water conservation may not seem to be an important issue right now, but it is at these times of heavy rains that one should be most aware. Conserve what water you can for a day full of sunshine, because one never knows what tomorrow may bring.

If you have any questions, comments, or would like more information about any of the principles discussed in this article, please contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticulture extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu.