

Water Conservation Update

Water Resources Association of San Benito County

Fall is the time to start reducing your irrigation times.

Turn off your irrigation system when the rainy season begins.

Need assistance with your irrigation controller?

Call the WRASBC...we can assist you!



San Benito
County Fair
at Bolado Park

October 4th-6th

Come by the WRASBC booth in the Pavilion to learn how saving water saves you money and helps our community.



Reasons to Reduce the Lawn in Your Landscape

Across the United States, it is estimated that turf grass lawns cover 62,500 square miles of ground! Most lawns are simply too big to be useful, with high maintenance costs, minimal wildlife value, low aesthetic interest, and negative environmental impact. Though our obsession with immaculate expanses of grass has been long in the making, it is not too late to change.

Why are there so many turf grass lawns?

Some people speculate that the American infatuation with mowed lawns stems back to our ancestral beginnings in the savannahs of Africa, where lower grass provided open sight lines to lurking predators. More recently, in the eighteenth century, close-cut lawns became a symbol of wealth in Europe, a practice that made its way across the Atlantic by the 1800s. Not only did rich landowners have the hired help required to maintain the lawn before the advent of power tools, but they had the luxury of dedicating a parcel of their land—often tamed at great expense—to something as frivolous as a non-food crop.

Lawns really became all the rage in the 1950s, when the post-World War II American Dream of a owning a house in the suburbs melded with widespread availability of power mowers, improvements in turf grass varieties, and the advent of effective pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. No longer a status symbol of the rich and famous, front lawns became the measure of a middle-class family's ability to keep up with the Joneses.

Today, lawns are undeniably the norm, blanketing the vast majority of suburban and rural home landscapes as well as commercial and government properties. Heralded for their ability to take foot traffic, they are fundamental to play areas, sports fields, and golf courses – as well as the lawn care industry, on which Americans spend \$30 billion dollars a year.

So, what is the problem with having so many turf grass lawns?

- **High water requirements.** Water conservation efforts are hampered by our collective insistence on maintaining large tracts of perfectly lush turf grass. Across the United States, over 7.9 billion gallons of water are used on landscapes each day, primarily on lawns—and most often this water is fresh and potable. Our collective practice of irrigating so much turf combined with billions of impervious surfaces that cause water to run off into streams instead of recharging the water table are major contributing factors to historically low groundwater levels across much of the country, especially in the west.

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Representing the City of Hollister, the City of San Juan Bautista, Sunnyslope County Water District, and San Benito County Water District.

Five ways the WRASBC can assist you in creating a water efficient landscape:

1. **FREE** Smart Gardening Class for the Fall and Winter on Saturday, September 28 from 9am—12 noon. This class teaches irrigation scheduling to ensure efficiency and water savings. Landscape care such as proper pruning, soil prepping and winter composting. Lastly, planting considerations for our California native and drought tolerant plants during the cool rainy season, ways to remove turf and ideas on using storm water.
2. The WRASBC offers a **FREE** irrigation system audit. After the audit the WRASBC will provide you with recommendations and calculate an irrigation schedule for your property.
3. Irrigation Hardware Rebates on MP Rotator sprinkler nozzles, rain sensors and hose timers. The WRASBC will rebate 50% of the price for these products up to \$100.
4. **FREE** water efficient landscape plans. Three different garden concepts to choose from! Not only will you save money and water....water efficient gardens require less maintenance than traditional landscapes. (Each plan is valued at \$500)
5. Check out the Water Wise Demonstration Garden at Dunne Park (corner of 6th/Powell). Drought tolerant and native plants are on display with efficient irrigation equipment and permeable pavers. Brouchures are available on our website or call and we'll send you one.

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Landscape irrigation makes up almost half of all residential water use and turf requires more water than almost any other plant in a residential landscape.

In our area, turf grass needs approximately 80 inches of water per year to keep it green and lush. Locally, we receive from 11 to 13 inches of rainfall per year. It makes the most sense to have Mother Nature irrigate for you by planting native or drought tolerant plants that only require rainfall or limited irrigation after being established.

- **High maintenance requirements.** Frequent and often costly maintenance is needed to keep turf grass looking its best. During peak growing months, a single lawn may require mowing more than once a week. During periods of drought, irrigation may be required to keep a lawn from going dormant. Yearly fertilizer is usually recommended for encouraging lush growth.

- **High pollution outputs with public health risks.** To stay healthy and productive, lawns require inputs that damage our environment and health. Until recently, lawn mowers have been excluded from EPA regulations regarding emissions standards, and subsequently the average riding mower emits the same amount of pollution in one hour as 34 cars. Gas-powered garden tools in general account for a whopping 5% of total air pollution in the United States.

Water pollution is also a problem because chemicals used to treat lawns run off in rainstorms, flowing into storm drains and eventually into our natural water bodies. Runoff spiked with fertilizers causes algae blooms, which causes aquatic plants and animals to suffer and perish from low oxygen and lack of sunlight. Depleted water bodies rob humans of important ecosystem services such as water filtration. Lawn chemicals may also present direct health risks humans: In a 1987 study by the National Cancer Institute, children living in homes where lawn pesticides were commonly used were 6.5 times more likely to develop leukemia.

- **Low wildlife value.** Turf grasses—exotic plants that evolved largely in Europe and Asia—provide little support for native biodiversity in North America. All plants have distasteful chemicals that prevent them from being eaten, except by a selection of creatures that evolved alongside them and over time developed tolerance for specific chemicals produced by specific types of plants. Because turf grass did not exist in North America before humans brought it here, the vast majority of North American insects have not evolved the ability to eat it. In sum, a lawn will not support many native insects. In the absence of healthy insect populations to feed on, the vast majority of other local wildlife—birds, bats, land mammals, frogs, toads, turtles, lizards, spiders and a myriad of other critters—literally cannot survive. The huge expanses of lawn cultivated across the United States thus represent a largely sterile environment, unable to support biodiversity that provides us with essential ecosystem services

Okay, how do I go about making my landscape water efficient?..... See the column on the left!