

The Nursery Papers

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Getting waterwise messages to your customers

Publicity during the recent drought has made people aware that the typical home garden consumes between 60 to 70% of all water used in the household. While water restrictions stopped some people gardening altogether, others became more thoughtful about gardening styles and practices. This *Nursery Paper* contains many of the useful waterwise messages used by water authorities and the gardening media during the drought. These messages for our customers should not be dumped along with the first showers.

2002 was a year of drought and water restrictions around the country. Whether the drought has broken by the time you read this or not, there is no doubt that dry times and water restrictions will come again.

While the drought highlighted a problem, the real issue is responsible and sustainable use of water over the long term. Nationwide changes in water and environmental management policies mean that even in good rainfall years, water that was once plentiful and cheap will become restricted and more costly.

Marketing opportunities

Waterwise messages can provide ongoing marketing opportunities by encouraging people to see garden centres as the key place to seek strategies and solutions in regard to water saving practices.

During the drought, The Nursery & Garden Industry Association of Western Australia and the WA Water Corporation ran a co-ordinated

campaign, along the lines of 'Don't stop gardening because of the drought', and 'Seek advice from your nearest garden centre'. It is not difficult to continue this type of cooperation and publicity to continually reinforce the waterwise message.



As Manager of Wild Flora Garden Centre in Fremantle, Rob Rogerson offers award winning waterwise advice to help his customers plan their gardens. His nursery offers a variety of local and native plants that thrive with little or no water all summer.

The Water Corporation is working with the Nursery and Garden Industry Western Australia, along with garden centres like Wild Flora, to ensure the best waterwise gardening advice is available to the community.

Nurseries are just one of the many parts of the West Australian community that are helping to build a strong water future for all of us. To find out the waterwise plants to look for in your nursery call 13 10 39.



OUR WATER FUTURE. IT'S UP TO ALL OF US.

Some marketing ideas for garden centres include:

Irrigation

The nursery and garden industry can play a leadership role in ensuring home gardeners use effective irrigation techniques.

Australia's extreme climate means irrigation should be used to maintain a more controlled environment that sustains plant life during hot

dry periods. There are climatic differences around the country. From tropical in the north to temperate and seasonal in the south, these changes affect the amount of irrigation gardens require. Irrigation works on replacing evapo-transpiration (ET), or part thereof depending on rainfall and plant type.

Consider a typical house block of about 1000 square metres (1/4 acre) and assume it has a garden area of 300m². The following table gives an idea of what water consumption (irrigation and rainfall) is required to replace ET.

Location	Evapo-transpiration (mm)	Water Used (Lpa)
Darwin	1000	300000
Perth	800	240000
Canberra/Adelaide Melbourne/Hobart	500	150000
Sydney	700	210000
Brisbane	800	240000

Adelaide water is one of the highest costs in the nation and costs close to \$1.00 per 1000 litres so the garden could cost \$150 per year in water alone, assuming no rainfall. However, this model assumes people water exactly matching their irrigation with their climate, efficient irrigation, all plant requirements are the same and does not consider climatic extremes.

Irrigation efficiency

Irrigation systems vary in their effectiveness of applying water to plants, referred to as the irrigation efficiency (IE). In basic terms it means that no system is totally uniform in the way that it applies water and there are many factors which affect this. Poor irrigation efficiency can significantly increase the amount of water that is required to keep that garden green. Efficiency in a general term can be measured as one being totally uniform down to 0 being non-uniform. Ideally irrigation systems should have an efficiency greater than 0.75.

Figure 2 shows the significant effect that poor irrigation efficiency can have on water efficiency. A very poor system could use up to one million litres (almost an Olympic size swimming pool) while the best system could use just 210,000 litres a year for the average garden.

Generally drip is the most efficient form of

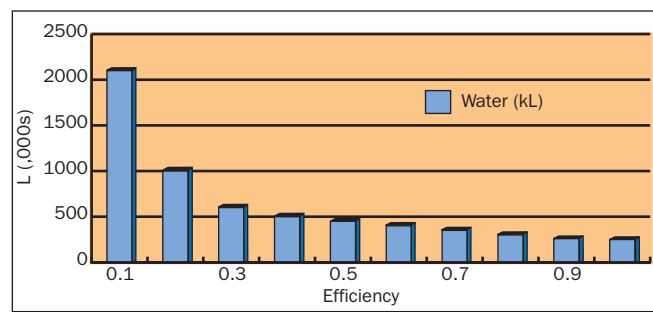


Figure 2: Water efficiency chart.

irrigation, because irrigation water is applied directly to the root zone at a lighter rate over a longer time. Drip irrigation efficiencies have been measured as high as 95% whereas a good pop-up system will return about a 75% efficiency.

Overwatering

One of the greatest wasters of water in the garden is overwatering. Gardeners should not only install irrigation systems that apply water evenly, they should know how much water is being applied by that system. For example if my irrigation requirement is 15mm/week and my system applies 25mm/hour, then I only need to run the system for 36 minutes/week if no rain falls.

A watering system needs to be flexible. Seasonal variation in water requirements may require gardeners to reassess and adjust their irrigation timers regularly. Good quality controllers are required for efficient irrigation and a rain sensor that disables watering after rain will stop wastage. Systems may also need to be adjusted once a garden is established when plant water requirements are lessened.

Providing advice

Since all gardens are different no two irrigation systems are exactly the same. This means that home irrigation systems need to be designed, which should be done by an experienced or trained irrigation professional.

Garden centres should be able to provide advice on designing and installing an efficient irrigation system or direct customers to where they can obtain professional advice. Many garden centres currently allocate relatively little space to irrigation products. Starter kits are no more than samplers and considerable space is required if you are to stock a good range.

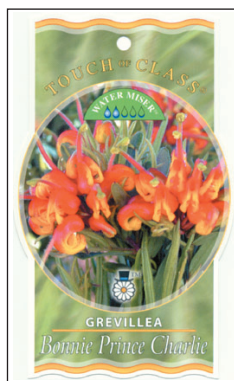
Sprinkler City, a shop within a shop at Bonds Nursery, Terrey Hills, Sydney, supplies both trade and consumers. It has a broad range of products and provides expert in-house advice to the do-it-yourself installer. They encourage home garden customers to draw up a plan of the area they want to irrigate and then they tailor a system for them. They also offer design and installation.

Garden centres without 'in-house' expertise, should have at least one staff member with product knowledge, and there are TAFE courses in urban irrigation and plumbing and some on-site training courses available. Alternatively, the service could be outsourced.

One option is to stock a wide range of irrigation products while 'outsourcing' a computerised irrigation design service. Another is forming a strategic alliance and network with local irrigation businesses that can provide these services. You can use the Irrigation Association of Australia's web site <www.irrigation.org.au> to search for a reputable Certified Irrigation Designer (CID) or a business to network with.

Garden design

If gardeners are going to succeed in keeping their garden looking good without using excessive quantities of water they need smart garden planning. Good garden design, soil preparation and appropriate plant selection are essential. Help your customers with plenty of information - fact sheets, information leaflets, display gardens, educational and benefit signage, directions to websites.



Plant selection

Guiding customers to choose plants with low water demand has never been easier. There are special collections with appropriate labels, such as the

Merriwa Waterwise Collection™ and Greenhills' Touch of Class Water Miser™ plants (as pictured). Merchandising displays, with benefit signage, of these plants provides a marketing opportunity. Display gardens that show attractive landscaping with these plants are an even better way to get the message across.

Succulents have the great advantage of being both dry tolerant and ultra-trendy - so they are, at least for the time being, a retailer's marketing dream. Many herbs fall into the dry tolerant category, so here is a renewed marketing opportunity for herbs;

or make up your own list; or download one off the web - there are several there, including on most state water authority sites. And of course there are natives, particularly indigenous natives.



Consideration should be given to developing display gardens that include irrigation, different mulches - organic or pebble and/or windbreaks with an explanation of how wind can cause evaporation. This may result in the sale of more trees and lattice.

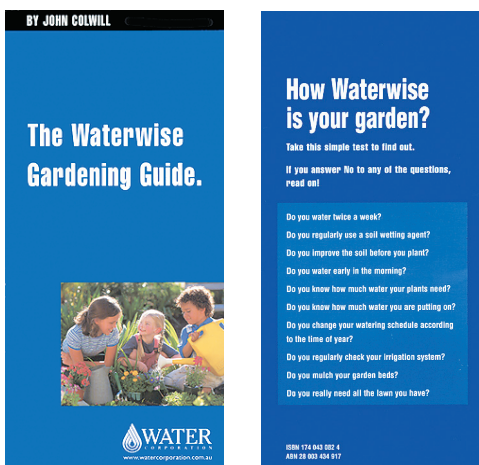
For customers who continue to grow softer-foliaged, high water use plants, you can provide advice on grouping together plants with similar water needs. A section of the WA Water Corporation booklet on waterwise gardening has information on one, two and three drop plants and their respective watering requirements.

Lawn

Lawn care continues to worry many gardeners. Garden centres should be able to provide advice on lawns, including information on choosing drought resistant grass, the planting, watering and maintenance of lawns during dry periods and on alternatives to lawn.

Soil preparation and mulch

No matter how information is available it seems that people often still need to be educated about these subjects. They need to be reminded that soil improvement and the addition of organic matter increases the moisture and nutrient-holding capacity of the soil and lessens the amount of water that is required. It should not be hard for garden centre staff to particularly target people with large purchases and those that might be new gardeners, and ensure and encourage good soil preparation – and sell product in the process.



WA Water Corporation booklet on waterwise gardening.

In regard to mulch, garden centres could:

- Explain the different types you stock.
- Explain how they work.
- Have a bag of each open so that customers can see and touch and feel them.
- Tell customers to apply mulch to moist soil.
- Tell them that the mulch layer should be at least five centimetres thick.
- And that they need to reapply mulch as necessary, perhaps once or twice each year.

Water storing crystals and soil wetters

Likewise, despite everything written about water storing crystals and soil wetters there is still huge confusion as to the differences and how they work.

- Your staff should be able to explain the difference between them and why the customer might buy one of each.
- Have a demonstration on how to use water crystals – show them after they have been soaked and have formed a gel; have a pot where they are used correctly (placed around the root zone); beside another pot where they are used incorrectly (sitting



Bulleen Art & Garden, Victoria, has a greywater dedicated section and information.

on top of the soil, drawing water from the soil). Something that gets people talking has to be good for sales.

- Have a visual demonstration on how a soil wetter works.

Rainwater tanks and advice on using greywater

If nurseries are going to position themselves to provide solutions and strategies, they might also consider stocking water tanks and forming a strategic alliance with an installer. If the crowds around the water tank stands at recent garden shows are any indication, this is a huge growth area and garden centres would be the logical supplier.

Garden centres should be able to provide information on recycling grey water, as it is an area about which there is a lot of public confusion.

The bottom line

Use the messages from the recent drought to take a positive, proactive approach to convince customers that they can get valuable advice from garden centres. And, that they can continue gardening and buying plants and use less water in the process.

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