

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE WATER

By Susan J. Billmayer

Water – what a precious resource in the state of Montana. We here in North Central Montana could use some more snow this winter to help protect the winter wheat crops that were planted last fall and to fill up some reservoirs for the cattle to have some drinking water and some grass to eat next summer. As farmers and ranchers, our lively hood depends on water – to hell with the yard and garden. When you get done hauling water to the cows you might consider hauling some water to the trees in the yard or hope they are drought tolerant. If you live in a city or town you have to pay for your water and that can get expensive. Receiving a good rainfall every week would help but that is not reality here in Montana. So what's our next choice? Develop a water efficient landscape.

A water efficient landscape begins with the organization and planning of how best to use the water available to you. Consider what you use for irrigation. Drip irrigation, soaker hoses and bubblers use much less water and can be used to water individual plants. Group your plants together based on their watering needs, some plants needing more water and some less. Pay attention to the weather and time of day when you water. It is most efficient to water in the early morning when the temperatures are rising. Avoid watering during hot and windy periods with sprinklers that throw a fine mist into the air. The water never reaches the plants and is lost to evaporation. Hot and windy describes most of eastern Montana, most of the summer. I always figured most of my water ended up in North Dakota thanks to our prevailing west winds. Set your lawn mower a little higher and the grass will use less water. Another possibility is to reduce the amount of lawn grass. Dig out some sod and put in a perennial bed that you can water with drip irrigation. Create some rock or stone pathways in your yard. Convert a small yard to some multi-level entertainment decks and use some container gardening ideas.

Mulches are used to conserve water, keep the soil cooler during the hot summer and help to reduce the number of weeds. Mulches can be put directly on the soil or over landscape fabric. Organic mulches like peat, grass clippings and wood chips are great and will slowly decompose in the soil and that helps to improve the soil. Don't use grass clippings that have had weed killer applied to the lawn. Be cautious about bringing that farm straw into your beds and gardens, you could end up with some undesirable weeds and some volunteer grain growing in your garden.

Also, very important to a water efficient landscape is planting drought tolerant species. These plants will still need some water to get them established. Drought tolerant plants work great on the south and west sides of building that get extremely hot in the summer.

Here is a list of some drought tolerant plants to use:

Bearberry, Creeping juniper, Hen and chicks, Virginia creeper, Yucca, Achillea, Caragana, Red Japanese barberry, Purple-leaf sand cherry.

Trees: Green Ash, Ponderosa Pine, Boxelder

Perennial Flowers: Bitterroot, Blue Flax, Gayfeather, Blanketflower, Coralbells, Sedum

Annual Flowers: Moss Rose, Tickseed, Globe amaranth, and Cosmos