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# A little frog shall lead them

Regional Water Authority hopes free moisture meters get customers to conserve

BY DEBBIE ARRINGTON



**How do you persuade people to save water when there isn't a drought?**

That's the task currently facing Sacramento area water providers.

"In California, we've had a feast or famine mentality," said Amy Talbot of the Regional Water Authority, "but we always need to be prepared for drought."

"Rain or shine, make water efficiency a way of life. That's our message now."

Water providers are trying to communicate that message with the help of free moisture meters that look like little comic frogs.

As the umbrella organization over 21 water districts and agencies serving 2 million people in the Sacramento area, the authority is currently offering the froggy meters at its BeWaterSmart.info website.

The little foggy meters are a hit, said Talbot, RWA's water efficiency program manager. So far, the authority has given away thousands and has thousands more available.

"They're a low-tech answer [to efficient irrigation]," she said. "They're tangible, visual reminders every day. They're easy to use. You can get your kids involved; let them check the moisture."

These meters also can be key to a healthier garden. "In non-drought years, focus on making your plants healthy," Talbot said. "That means giving them the right amount of water, not too little, but not too much."

In summer, Sacramento's water use spikes dramatically, mostly due to outdoor irrigation.

But in focus groups, people believed the most water is used indoors. "That's because that's where they notice it—washing dishes, doing laundry, taking showers," Talbot said. "But 60 to 80% of our use in summer is actually outdoors."

In the Sacramento area, it adds up to an average of 200 gallons per person per day in summer, two to three times our average winter use.

During drought, persuading people to cut back use is easier because "they see the lakes and reservoirs at low levels; they realize they need to cut back," Talbot said. But after periods such as the heavy rains last winter and spring, people are less likely to pay attention to how much they use.

Now that temperatures are in the 90s again, "people figure, 'If I'm hot, my plants must be thirsty,'" Talbot said. "But they need to check the soil first."

And by focusing on garden health, water efficiency experts can persuade people to keep conserving.

"What we've found is that people really want a healthy landscape," Talbot said. "They want to be good stewards, but they may overwater or underwater their garden. Either way is not good for plants."

This summer, plants aren't drought stressed and have a chance to get healthier.

"Now, we have time to really get to know our landscapes," Talbot said, "to get in tune with what our plants actually need."

And a free froggy moisture meter can help. □

**"Rain or shine, make water efficiency a way of life. That's our message now."**  
Amy Talbot,  
Regional Water Authority

Debbie Arrington, an award-winning garden writer and lifelong gardener, is co-creator of the Sacramento Digs Gardening blog and website.