

Save Water to Save Money

by Albert Sanchez

Plants, animals and human beings need water to survive. One of the primary sources of water in Tuolumne County is Lyon's Reservoir, fed by water from Pinecrest Lake, which is operated by Pacific Gas & Electric for renewable, electrical power generation. Pinecrest receives its water from melted snow that drains a 27-square-mile watershed above the lake. Two additional watersheds—Herring Creek and South Fork Stanislaus River above Lyons—total 40 square miles and drain directly into Lyons Reservoir. 95% of the water used by Tuolumne Utilities District (TUD) customers, along with other water districts—such as Twain Harte Community Services District—come from this source.

Low precipitation amounts these past four years resulted in reduced snow melt and lower river flows into Lyon's Reservoir. "Spill" condition is when snow melt produces more water than Pinecrest Lake and Lyons Reservoir can hold. "End of spill" marks the date when river flow slows to the point that it can be contained within the two reservoirs' storage capacity. From that point on, water districts are accessing stored water. We are now using stored water earlier in the summer. We must conserve water TUD has requested more water releases from Pinecrest Lake but there is a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requirement that the water level in Pinecrest Lake be maintained at a higher level through Labor Day weekend.

So, what can we do? Save water (and save money at the same time)! There are numerous ways to save water in the home. Since a major use of summer water is in the garden, let's start there. The following are examples that may be applied to all gardening:

- Use a drip system if you do not have one already. It waters the roots directly and prevents wasted water through runoff. It may be programmed to water only when needed and some weather-controlled timers will decrease the amount of irrigation when it rains. Check periodically for leaks or clogged drippers.
- Plan your garden before planting, keeping in mind the strategy of conserving water. Each plant has its own water needs (amount and frequency), so arrange plants with like water needs together. This approach saves water and minimizes diseases caused by too much moisture.
- Save water by mulching. Water evaporates more slowly in soil that has a thick blanket of mulch, so less water is needed less frequently.
- Water in the early morning to slow evaporation caused by the hot mid-day sun.
- Tomatoes are a favorite with most home gardeners. Water them slowly and deeply with a drip system—water should percolate 6-8 inches into the soil to encourage deep roots. According to the "California Master Gardener Handbook," you should water established tomato plants when the top 2-3" of soil is dry. This will encourage a crop of healthy tomatoes. (Assess your individual situation; your particular plants, amount of water and frequency may differ.)

- Lawns are water-intensive. Many people over water and sprinklers often waste water by irrigating beyond the lawn area. Check sprinklers periodically for misalignment and water leaks. Excess water running off can carry pesticides and herbicides into the environment.
- Select grasses that need less water, as well as native plants and shrubs for landscaping. Buffalo grass is a low water alternative compared to other turf species. The University of California Integrated Pest Management website (<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/TOOLS/TURF/TURFSPECIES/charhighht.html>) offers comparisons between turf species.

There are numerous other ways of saving water. The Environmental Protection Agency lists many helpful tips to conserve water in the home and garden at their web site: www.epa.gov/epahome/home.htm. Tuolumne Utility District has helpful tips to conserve water at <http://www.tudwater.com/water-conservation>. The State of California also has a website with water conservations tips and that is; <http://saveourwater.com/>.

One of the best ways to save money in this troubled economy is to save water. Make a habit of saving water and you'll see the results in your water meter and pocketbook.

Please check with your own water district for current water restrictions.

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