

County of Sacramento

Landscaping During the Drought Frequently Asked Questions

May, 2015

The purpose of these FAQs is to provide owners, tenants and managers of residential, commercial, and industrial properties with information on landscaping practices during this severe drought. Landscaping requirements in the Sacramento County Zoning Code and Water Conservation Ordinance can be found at our website: <http://www.per.saccounty.net>

May I replace my lawn with artificial turf, bark, pavement, or gravel?

Single-family homes may replace lawn and other landscaped areas with artificial turf, bark, gravel or similar materials. Paving or concrete is limited to 40% of the front yard.)

If you are considering replacing your lawn, use of drought-tolerant plants that are low maintenance and water efficient is highly recommended. Drought tolerant plants are more sustainable and make for nice, landscaped yards

Although artificial turf can reduce water use; it requires light watering from time to time. Additionally, some companies install storm water cisterns underneath turf to collect water. However, artificial turf also replaces healthy soil in your front yard that naturally absorbs storm water and other runoff and distributes the water to other plants. Live plants are habitats for bees and small animals, cool our houses and even can clean the air and sequester carbon. Artificial turf can also warm up to very high temperatures, particularly in summer, which can heat up the house and be unsafe to play on..

Multi-family, commercial and industrial properties may replace lawn with drought tolerant plantings. In required landscaped areas, use of artificial turf, rock, or pavement is limited to 25% of the landscaped area.

May I turn off my sprinkler system?

Turning off irrigation for lawn areas is acceptable.

For residential properties, it is highly recommended that tree, shrub, and groundcover areas be maintained and hand watered or irrigated within the limits of their Water District requirements. Trees and shrubs require significant maintenance and investment to establish, and are not as easily replaced as lawn.

For multi-family, commercial and industrial properties, trees and shrubs in required landscape areas must be maintained and irrigated or hand watered within the limits of their respective Water District requirements.

Will I be cited for a brown or patchy lawn?

No, you will not be cited for brown or patchy lawn on any property during times of drought, the die-off of lawn areas will not be considered a violation of the County Zoning Code. While you may have a dead/dying lawn, it is necessary to make sure the lawn is not overgrown. Lawns must remain mowed regardless of health of the lawn. Overgrown lawns whether live or dead, are violations of the County's Nuisance Code.

What can I do to better manage my landscaping during a drought?

In general, seek to reduce the amount of water applied to landscapes, and prioritize the maintenance of trees and shrub areas.

- Run irrigation using an automatic controller (or timer), or hand water. Consider a self-adjusting "smart" controller that reads weather conditions.
- Irrigate in multiple, short cycles to allow water to soak in and avoid run-off.
- Mulch shrub and flower beds heavily; Mulch slows the evaporation of water from the soil.
- Avoid maintenance practices that stimulate plant growth, such as pruning, cutting lawns short and frequently, or heavy fertilization. Growth = water use.
- Repair leaks and "tune" your irrigation to avoid overwatering or spraying onto sidewalks etc.
- If installing a new landscape, plant from smaller containers such as 4" pots or one-gallon containers vs five gallon or larger. Smaller plants will require less water to get them established.
- Group plants by similar watering needs.

Visit the website below from the California Landscape Contractors Association for additional tips on overcoming drought:

<http://www.clca.org/clca/about/consumer/drought/>

How do I change my lawn to drought-tolerant landscaping?

Modifying lawn to drought-tolerant landscaping is highly encouraged. For multi-family, commercial and industrial properties, renovation of landscaping to comply with the County Water Conservation Ordinance requires a review by County staff. There is no fee for this review. Contact Michael Wall at wallm@saccounty.net for information. Visit the links provided below for resources and great ideas for converting high water use landscapes to water conserving landscapes:

California Native Plant Society:

http://www.cnps.org/cnps/grownative/tips/lawn_alternatives.php

River Friendly Landscaping Guidelines:

<http://www.ecolandscaping.org/riverfriendly/resources.html>

UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden - Drought Resources:

<http://publicgarden.ucdavis.edu/public-garden/drought-resources>

Sunset Magazine resources:

<http://www.sunset.com/garden/earth-friendly/lose-the-lawn-low-water-landscaping/view-all>

<http://www.sunset.com/garden/landscaping-design/landscaping-ideas-with-stone/view-all>

Regional Water Authority sites:

<http://www.rwah2o.org/rwa/>

<http://bewatersmart.info/find-your-water-provider/>

<http://www.rwa.watersavingplants.com/>

What does the County's Water Conservation Ordinance say about what I can do on my property?

The County adopted a Water Conservation Ordinance in 1990 which is currently being updated. The Water Conservation Ordinance applies to new construction and major renovations of existing landscaping. The updated ordinance will ensure the County's ordinance is in full compliance with the Governor's Executive Order B-29-15 on Severe Drought Conditions.

How will the landscape requirements change in the Zoning Code update?

The County is undergoing a major update of the Zoning Code, slated for adoption in summer 2015. For single-family residential areas:

- Front yards must be landscaped with drought tolerant plants or other landscaping, except for the allowed paving for parking
- Irrigation systems, preferably drip or micro-spray, must be provided with new construction, but the use of irrigation may be waived in the event of mandatory conservation measures
- Other options for landscaping (artificial turf, hardscape materials, etc.) may be considered through design review

Commercial, multi-family, institutional, and industrial properties will have relatively minor changes to landscape requirements in the Zoning Code update.

The County will review all ordinances to ensure compliance with State requirements per the Governor's Executive Order B-29-15 on Severe Drought Conditions.

How do I determine who my water district is and what incentives they may offer for reducing water use?

There are over 20 Water Districts in the Sacramento area. Please see the link below from the Regional Water Authority to determine your water district, and check with your district regarding the specific policies and incentives they may offer. Several water districts offer "Cash for Grass" incentives.

<http://bewatersmart.info/rebates-services/>

How should I manage my pool during the drought? Can I put in a pool during the drought?

Some Water Districts currently prohibit installation of pools. Please visit the Regional Water Authority link below to find your water district and check requirements regarding specific restrictions for pools:

<http://bewatersmart.info/find-your-water-provider/>

Are individual graywater systems allowed?

Yes. The County has adopted the 2013 California Plumbing Code that does allow for graywater systems. Plans and a plumbing permit are required.

Why has the County approved new homes if we know we will be short of water

Subdivisions that have been approved for development include long range plans for supplying water. Many of these new areas will not be fully online for several years.