

Does landscaping get a bad rap as water waster?

By Mark Grossi
mgrossi@fresnobee.com

It's August in a miserable California drought year — water-use crackdowns, fines, lawsuits, shaming and brown lawns. People are getting a little defensive about the manic push to save water.

The defensiveness surfaced last week when two experts from the University of California at Riverside wrote a commentary saying trees, lawns, shrubs and flowers “are under unrelenting attack.” In support of green spaces in cities, they say landscaping is getting a bad rap as a water waster.

Donald R. Hodel, environmental horticulture adviser, and Dennis R. Pittenger, environmental horticulturist in the department of botany and plant sciences, wrote [the commentary](#) on natural and psychological benefits of landscaping.

The online reaction to the UC Riverside commentary is also interesting. There are three comments so far. They express strong feelings.

One calls the commentary “the most profound synopsis I have read in a while.”

Another is from someone at the University of California who says the commentary “blind-sided” him: “Do the authors really want for us to start telling people to go ahead and water their lawns in cities with desert climates?”

Definitely, protect your trees. And we're not asking you to kill your lawn — maybe let it get a little golden. But a lot of people over-water their lawns. For those people, it's a good idea to save water by cutting back.

Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board

This summer, that kind of response seems inevitable, even though state regulators have not directly ordered people to kill their landscaping. Some people may see no other choice.

Clovis residents, for instance, are being fined if they don't reduce water use by 36% each month. The most logical place to cut water use is for landscaping.

[The State Water Resources Control Board](#) issued water cutback orders for California cities, including the big reduction for Clovis. Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the state board, says this is an emergency, but killing landscape is not on the table this summer.

“Definitely, protect your trees,” says chairwoman Felicia Marcus. “And we're not asking you to kill your lawn — maybe let it get a little golden. But a lot of people over-water their lawns. For those people, it's a good idea to save water by cutting back.”

In Clovis, people are trying to meet the state conservation mandate, leaders say. Conservation is the only option left, since the state has not been able to produce more water storage, says Lisa Koehn, assistant public utilities director in [Clovis](#).

“Water agencies are easy targets for regulation and turf is an easy target for reductions,” she says.

[Fresno](#) spokesman Mark Standriff says most of the water-reduction in his city has been in landscape irrigation. He says big improvements come when the city talks with people who are watering too often or on the wrong day.

“People are cooperative when you tell them there’s a problem and offer to help them,” he says.

The UC Riverside horticultural experts say the loss extends beyond the greenery. It also includes oxygen production, carbon sequestration, dust control, wildlife habitat, psychological well-being, jobs and recreation, they say.

At the same time, nobody is denying this has become the summer of the brown, blond or golden lawn. Drive through a few neighborhoods in most Valley cities, and you will see a few of them. They are a popular symbol of conservation, along with lawn removal and installation of synthetic turf or drought-tolerant plants.

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A few readers have said much the same thing this summer. In late June, [I spoke with Sjobergs](#), a Fresno couple who use recycled water to keep their yards green.

Jennifer Sjoberg says people need green places to connect with nature. It’s a passion with her.

Says Sjoberg: “We use gray water to stay green. I’m a big believer in green spaces for people, especially for children.”

Mark Grossi: [559-441-6316](tel:559-441-6316), [@markgrossi](#)