



GET THE **DROP** ON IRRIGATION

ACCORDING TO THE EPA, there are about 13.5 million irrigation systems installed in U.S. residential landscapes, and more than 300,000 new systems are installed each year. Some of those systems contribute to wasted landscape irrigation water, which is estimated to be up to 1.5 billion gallons each day. Clearly, there is a need for the design, installation and maintenance of new, efficient landscape irrigation systems.

Landscapers are in the perfect position to profit from this need while helping to conserve the country's water resources.

Get with the program

If you subcontract irrigation installation, check out the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense partners (www.epa.gov/watersense/) to find irrigation professionals who have been certified under a WaterSense labeled program. The program labels courses and irrigation equipment that meet criteria for water efficiency. With water conservation becoming a more

PROPER PLANNING CAN REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF WASTED IRRIGATION WATER AND INCREASE PROFITS.

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

widespread concern each year, it might be the right time for landscapers to get certified and provide their own irrigation services.

"There's no doubt that certification could help landscape contractors' businesses," says Rain Bird's Jennifer Riley-Chetwynd. "In some states, certification is required. We'll probably see more states embrace that. Homeowners are opening their eyes to the need to conserve. If they have a choice between certified and not, chances are they're going to choose a certified irrigation professional."

Andy Smith, external affairs director at the Irrigation Association, agrees. He says education is critical to water conservation.

"Frankly there are a lot of people out there who think if it's getting wet, it's getting watered — and that's just not so," he says.

The water needs of a lawn are different from those of a flower bed. Irrigation systems can be designed to efficiently deliver water to both.



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Proper planning

Even if you're not ready to expand into irrigation services, there are many ways landscapers can help their clients save water, especially when it comes to landscape design. A properly designed landscape can use drought-tolerant color, ornamentals and trees, and place plants with similar water needs together.

"In the past, zoning dedicated to turf irrigation was also used for watering adjacent seasonal color beds," says Jeff Gibson, landscape business manager for Ball Horticultural Co. "This typically results in more water applied to the seasonal color beds than needed, in turn creating a host of disease and maintenance issues. The common problem most landscapes face is overwatering, not underwatering."

You shouldn't feel constrained when designing water-saving landscapes. Plant breeders have made great strides in creating varieties that don't sacrifice big blooms, performance or disease resistance for drought tolerance. Retailers and wholesal-

ers have also become more cognizant of selling native plants that have most of their water needs met via rainwater.

"These days, irrigation is rapidly changing, as are the low-water-need varieties plant breeders are developing today," Gibson says. "The incorporation of better-zoned irrigation, the use of 'smart' controllers, and low pressure/low water emitting heads are all improvements for better care of live plant material, turf or in the beds."

Still, according to the EPA, only about 10% of residential irrigation systems use "smart" weather-based irrigation controllers. But we may be on the verge of wider acceptance.

"A number of models are available now, and prices are coming down each year," says Dale Devitt, professor of soil and water and director of the Center for Urban Water Conservation at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. "There has been extensive testing on them. In all cases, water savings associated with using smart controllers are at least 20%."

Water where you want it

Drip irrigation is another way to get precise amounts of water directly to the plants that need it. It can be used alone or as part of a larger irrigation system.

"The advantage of drip irrigation with sparse plantings like flowers and shrubs is that you're emitting water right to the root base," says Riley-Chetwynd. "There is no chance of it being knocked off course by wind, and very little lost to evaporation. The other advantage is that you can change emitters to give more gallons per hour for each plant."



PHOTOS COURTESY: RAIN BIRD CORP. (BELOW): IRRIGATION ASSOCIATION

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Different drip emitters (left) can be used to provide more water to individual plants. They can be used in conjunction with spray irrigation (above).

From materials to equipment, landscape contractors have options to create the best landscape for the site while conserving water.



“The tools are there for us to deliver efficient outcomes across the board — no question,” says Smith. “What we need to do as an industry are to pick up these tools and get to work educating customers.”

Irrigation design, installation, auditing and maintenance services present a great opportunity for landscapers to

FOR MORE INFO

The Irrigation Association: www.irrigation.org

The EPA WaterSense program:
www.epa.gov/watersense

WaterSmart Innovations 2010:
www.WaterSmartInnovations.com

The Irrigation Show 2010:
www.irrigationshow.org

The American Society of Irrigation Consultants:
www.asic.org

expand their businesses, retain current customers and save money for their clients over the long-term. With demands for water growing each day, you can feel good about (and market) the fact that your company is doing its part to help reduce the third of residential water that landscaping is estimated to use. 🌿

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