



Budget Water Wisely

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“Do you know how much water you’re applying to your landscapes?”

That question, posed by Tom Ash, director of conservation alliances, **HydroPoint Data Systems**, while speaking to a roomful of industry professionals at New England Grows, Boston, Mass., is one all green industry professionals should consider. The reason? The key to establishing and maintaining a luscious lawn lies in applying the right amount of water at the right time and at the right root depth – all the time, Ash asserts.

That’s why water woes of any kind can impact landscapes drastically. And since water-related issues of some sort currently plague many parts of the country, all landscape professionals must pay special attention to their watering practices.

When drought strikes, public agencies generally respond by imposing irrigation restrictions and, sometimes, by banning landscape planting in general. While such bans may appear to remedy the trouble, Ash says they generally do not produce the desired results. "They’re aiming at the wrong target," he says, referring to irrigation restrictions in parts of Georgia and landscaping bans in New Mexico and North Carolina. "Seventy-five percent of the water use in those areas is interior."

Despite this, contractors can be more careful with water resources by creating smart irrigation plans for the properties they maintain – even when drought is not prevalent. "I think anywhere in the country we can save 40 to 50 percent of the water we’re using in landscapes without a whole lot of effort," he notes.

Specifically, he urged contractors to consider the following questions when creating a smart irrigation plan:

- 1) What is the area’s evapotranspiration?
- 2) How much water do the plants need?
- 3) How much water should I apply?
- 4) How reliable is the area’s water supply?
- 5) What are the regulations for controlling water quality in the area?
- 6) Why is water efficiency important?
- 7) What can I, as a green industry professional, do to be water efficient?

When attempting to answer question No. 3 correctly, Ash recommends contractors use the following water budget equation: The evapotranspiration times plants' water needs times the irrigated landscape area equals the landscape water budget. For example, a Colorado property's budget equation may look like this: 30 inches times .80 (80 percent) times 1 acre equals 24 inches of water per year for 1 acre of Kentucky bluegrass – or 4 inches per month (during the growing season), or 1 inch per week (during the growing season).

This water-efficient equation covers irrigation needs across the country and does not require pricey equipment for implementation.

But irrigation components should be examined closely on a regular basis, especially on properties where scalded spots, sunken turf or flooding occur. In such cases, Ash suggests contractors check sprinkler heads regularly to ensure they are working correctly. A preseason check can be beneficial. Where "hot spots" appear in turf, Ash advises scouting for broken heads, crooked fixtures and clogged lines. Such problems can spell coverage challenges – not an inadequate water supply.

One remedy Ash recommends for watering woes is the use of smart controllers, which can verify water use on any type of landscape. And based on the water-wise data gathered, the system changes irrigation schedules as the weather changes – automatically. Some states are even considering legislation to require the use of smart controllers on every property, Ash says.

Overall, contractors should embrace change when it comes to water efficiency. Conversion to new ideas must extend beyond implementation, Ash reminds. "Measure your successes," he says. That means collecting and comparing irrigation run times, plant growth ratios and related financial figures. Without evaluating the results, contractors cannot pinpoint the best plans for their properties.