

Communities join forces on water conservation

THURSDAY, 26 JULY 2012 02:00 EVA ANTONIJEVIC



On my daily commute to work at the Summerland Gardens, I drive past an unusual sight. The new Okanagan Waterwise "Make Water Work" billboard is nestled between the fast food advertisements. The declaration "Water - One Inch A Week Will Do" encourages homeowners to reduce the amount of water applied to their lawns and the use of the billboard underscores the urgency of the message. North Americans use more water than anyone else on our planet, and Okanagan Valley residents use double the amount of other Canadians: a shocking 675 litres per day. Lawn and turf grass irrigation is a major drain on the Okanagan Basin's water supply; it uses up to three times more water per square foot than agricultural irrigation.



The declaration of a highway sign "Water - One Inch A Week Will Do" encourages homeowners to reduce the amount of water applied to their lawns and the use of the billboard underscores the urgency of the message.

July marks the beginning of Friends of Summerland Ornamental Gardens' pilot

project on water conservation and public education.

The first phase of the project will be an irrigation audit to acquire current baseline water use in the gardens.

In the second phase, a series of water meters will be installed, to generate water use data for several new demonstration garden beds, each planted with plant varieties requiring different levels of water.

The goal of the project is to establish practical techniques for reducing water use by 15-30 per cent, while still maintaining the garden's esthetic beauty.

In addition, the Friends will be conducting community workshops on topics such as dryland gardening, learning to use a landscape irrigation calculator, growing native plants, using rain barrels, and storm water management, among others.

The project also involves undertaking a public survey about water use and current garden practices.

Our project is one of many in the Okanagan region being undertaken to help us change our ways.

Here is a quick highlight of a few other water-related projects that have come across my radar screen.

Ted Van der Gulik, Engineering Manager in the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Chair of the Irrigation Industry Association of British Columbia, said: "The most effective voluntary action to conserve water is to reduce its use in landscaping."

Van der Gulik and his team have developed online agriculture and landscape irrigation calculators to help agriculturalists and gardeners alike to meet their water needs by using adaptive irrigation scheduling techniques.

UBC Okanagan Computer Science Associate Professor Ramon Lawrence and his research team are developing sensor nodes that can predict and modify water distribution at the source of irrigation to reduce water waste during the irrigation process.

Lawrence is working with the City of Kelowna Parks Department on his research project, using city lawns to conduct experiments.

Assistant Biology Professor Miranda Hart, UBCO, is proposing to combat the need for intense irrigation by diversifying the type of microbes found in the soil, which will minimize the need for irrigation.

John Janmaat, Associate Professor of Economics, UBCO, is another contributor to the valley's water research.

His particular field of expertise is the economics of water resources, and he studies factors that determine water use in the Okanagan and other regions.

His academic paper "Green with Lawn Envy" discusses the results of one of his environmental attitude surveys and illustrates that the current water cost via metering is still too low to cause significant changes in outdoor use.

The City of Kelowna endorsed a Water Sustainability Action Plan in 2007 and their Water Smart program strives to reduce peak demand.

Zoe Kirk, the Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen Water Conservation Ambassador, comments:

"Working together valley wide, sharing resources and a focused campaign, provides the opportunity for broader uptake of the conservation message. As I conduct water conservation

initiatives in the RDOS, I look for opportunities to partner with other stakeholders i.e. Friends of the Summerland Garden and Fortis. Also, The RDOS is undertaking metering projects in both Naramata and West Bench this year, which will provide usage data to better understand where to begin to 'balance' water demand and future infrastructure requirements."

The Town of Oliver is contributing to our water smart education and has published a booklet entitled "Waterwise Gardening for Home and Small Acreage Owners of the Oliver Area" by Paula Rodriguez de la Vega.

Many of the Okanagan Valley's organizations are coming together, sharing information and resources, working on joint ventures and educational outreach, all with the same goal.

Okanagan residents need to be involved with preparing for our future water needs and we can feel encouraged that so many great minds and organizations are mounting efforts to help us all ensure that the Valley won't run dry.

For anyone interested in becoming a FOG water stewardship volunteer please contact me at friends.summerlandgardens@gmail.com

Eva Antonijevic is Project Manager of Friends of Summerland Ornamental Gardens.