

Nursery making water work



By Vernon Morning Star

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Without water, John and Maria Byland would be out of business.

As the owners of Bylands Nurseries – a major supplier of plants to garden centres throughout the Okanagan – water is vital to their work. As a result, they're more aware than some people of the importance of the resource, so they've taken steps both around their business and their home to conserve water.

The family business has been in operation since just a few years after John's father Adrian arrived here from Holland in 1953 and began growing trees for the orchard industry. Today, the family actively farms 400 acres in the Okanagan, in addition to acreage in the Fraser Valley.

And while the Bylands have earned international attention for their environmental stewardship and water conservation practices, this commitment shows in their personal lives as well.

The landscape around their West Kelowna home has evolved during the 17 years they've been there, but there are still native mature pines and mahonia (Oregon grape) which form a part of it, along with non-native, drought-tolerant

plants such as the rugged pink rugosa roses interspersed with blue clouds of Russian sage which line the driveway.

But reducing water use doesn't mean they don't grow their own vegetables, most of which require regular watering to produce a crop for the kitchen. In fact, John is particularly proud of the veggie patch. He mostly waters by hand so plants needing more water get it, and those needing less receive less. Rows of kale and cucumbers are watered using a drip irrigation line so evaporation and waste are minimized.

He points out that even his row of cedars has become relatively waterwise, because he uses drip irrigation for them as well as mulching to retain soil moisture. Once established, they need less water too as the roots go deep into the soil.

An exposed bank has been planted in junipers which are very drought-tolerant and yet present a green, living wall along the driveway.

Maria points out that knowing your soil type is essential. Clay soils can lead some people to over water, and gravelly soils can lead to under-watering. Amending the soil so it has proper structure to retain moisture is important, she explains.

And water management, including controlling your automatic sprinkler system so it's adjusted based on seasonal requirements is also important, notes John.

"An improperly-managed irrigation system can waste a lot of water and cause problems for plants," he adds. But plants that receive just the right amount of water are more resistant to diseases such as root rot (a common disease caused by too much water).

Back at the nursery, all runoff is collected in recycling ponds where it is mixed with fresh water and used to irrigate again. The system has saved the Bylands a third of the water they used to use.

Larger plant containers are watered using drip irrigation now instead of overhead, and the nursery makes its own compost from discarded plants, which is used as mulch or as a soil amendment.

"We take a more-scientific approach today, ensuring each plant gets the appropriate amount of water, delivered at the appropriate time," says John.

With 24 per cent of all Okanagan water used on household lawns and gardens, and less water available per person than anywhere in Canada, valley residents are encouraged to reduce outdoor water use this summer. Take the pledge to Make Water Work at www.MakeWaterWork.ca and enter to win \$5,000 in WaterWise yard upgrades.

Take the pledge to:

- Water plants. Not pavement.
- Water between dusk and dawn.
- Leave lawn 5-8 cm (2-3 inches) tall
- Leave grass clippings as mulch
- Top dress with compost; and
- Change out some lawn for drought-tolerant turf and/or native and low-water variety plants.

Judie Steeves is with Make Water Work, an initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board and its Okanagan WaterWise program.

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