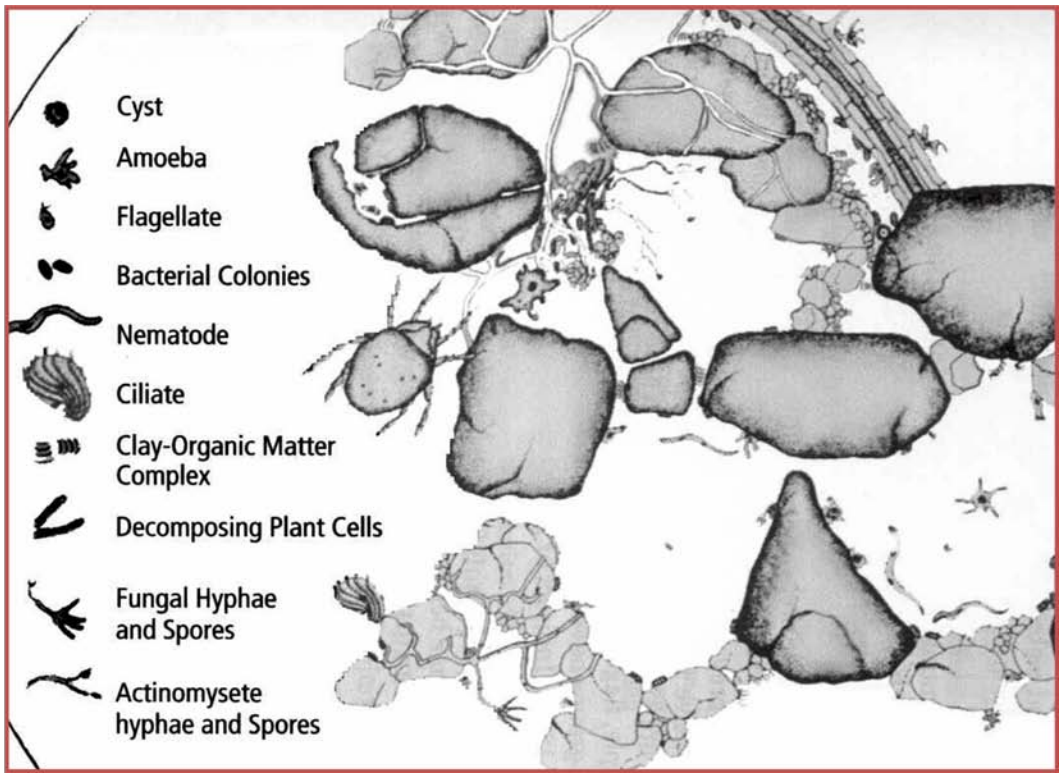
Workshop Overview

The dry, hot season is approaching meaning outdoor watering will increase. In April PWC held a workshop entitled: **Basics of Waterwise Landscaping**. Here are some highlights from that workshop that can help us all to water more efficiently during the summer months.

Healthy Soils – Graham Golbuff, Seattle Tilth

Soils are the foundation for all good landscaping and especially waterwise landscaping. Feeding soils with organic materials, like compost, helps combat pests and stores water and nutrients. Healthy soils also reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and pesticides, store rainwater (reducing runoff), filter out pollutants and store carbon. Soil is made up of minerals, air, water and organic matter. Healthy soils are alive.

Soil is alive!



Feeding the soil is easy:

1) Amend with compost or other organic matter

Compost feeds soil organisms and creates a healthy environment for them to live in. It opens up clay soil and improves moisture and nutrient capacity of sandy soil. It also helps correct pH and nutrient imbalances. How much compost? Lawns: 1-2" tilled to 6", Gardens: 2-4" tilled in 10-12" deep. Use more in sandy soils, less in heavy clay.

2) Mulch existing plants

A variety of organic materials can be used as mulch: compost, leaves, sawdust, fine bark, grass clippings, wood chips and coarse bark. Mulch smaller materials ½ to 2" deep, while coarser materials at 2-4" deep. It's best to use woody mulches (chips and bark) for woody plants (trees & shrubs). Use non-woody mulches for non-woody plants such as annuals, perennials, berries and

roses. Mulch at least once per year. In spring mulch trees and shrubs to prevent weeds. In early summer mulch gardens to hold moisture and feed plants. In fall mulch beds to prevent erosion and winter weeds. Be sure to remove weeds and grass before spreading mulch and keep mulch away from plant stems.

3) Choose "natural organic" or "slow-release" fertilizers when additional nutrients are needed Your best option is a fertilizer that is "natural organic." Lawns and gardens often need additional nutrients, trees and shrubs less so. Fertilize annuals and gardens when planting and mid-season. Fertilize trees and shrubs only if they show need. If you need to fertilize, do so moderately and responsibly.

Graham highly recommends getting a soil test. It will help you decide the best way to amend your soil. For more information call the experts at the Garden Hotline (206) 633-0224, help@gardenhotline.org.

Conserving Water with Turfgrass – Dr. Gwen Stahnke, WSU Extension

Seed mixes sold in the Northwest are made up of grasses that will flourish and have different characteristics to help them survive in various environments. For example, perennial ryegrass is very wear-tolerant and serves as a reliable full-sun grass. Fine fescues are shade tolerant and don't take a lot of wear. Mixing the two together gives you a turf that should work well over most lawn areas. Pick grass mixes that suit your site.

Here are the characteristics of common grasses used in the Northwest.

1) Perennial Ryegrass – very wear-tolerant, good in full sun, fast establishment, use on heavy or waterlogged soils, bunch-grass type.
2) Kentucky Bluegrass – wear tolerant, likes high pH (6.5 – 7.5), blends well with other grasses. In Western Washington, Kentucky Bluegrass should be used only as part of a turfgrass mixture. It's used because it produces lateral stems or rhizomes which help hold seed mixtures together. It needs a period of dormancy. In January and February it becomes susceptible to invasion by moss and annual bluegrass.
3) Fine Fescue (includes chewings fescue, slender creeping red fescue, strong creeping red fescue, hard fescue, blue or "sheeps" fescue and true sheeps fescue) – low maintenance, low wear tolerance, shade & drought tolerant, do not like wet soils, can be thatchy. May thin out if they sit in water over the winter season. These are a bunch-type grass.
4) Colonial Bentgrass – low nitrogen requirement, less thatch than creepers, better wear resistance than creepers, low water use, work well with fine fescues, bright color. Bentgrass is susceptible to brown patch but it isn't killed by it.
5) Tall Fescue – adapted to moderately wet areas, withstands drought because it has deep roots, withstands moderately high salts, moderate shade and wear tolerant. Tall Fescue works well if you have a deep soil. If you have only 2 inches for a root zone the roots will not develop well. It is a bunch-type grass, so should be overseeded in spring and fall. It tolerates a broad range of soils. It does repair slowly and is brown patch susceptible. Best when blended with Kentucky Bluegrass (85% Tall Fescue).
6) American Buffalograss –doesn't grow well in the Pacific Northwest. Adapted to arid regions. Does not like sandy soils and is not shade tolerant.

Maintenance

Optimal mowing heights in Western Washington: 1-1/4 to 2" – Bluegrasses and Fine Fescues, 1-1-1/2" Ryegrasses, 2" Tall Fescues, ½ to ¾" Bentgrasses

You should remove no more than 30-40% of the leaf at one mowing. Return grass clippings to the turf if they are not excessive. Keep mower blade sharp.

Roots of cool-season grasses are produced in the spring and fall, so that's when you should fertilize. In Western Washington the last application of the year should be in late November or early December. Only fertilize moderately. Use a slow-release fertilizer (3-1-2 Ratio N-P-K) or only very small amounts of a quick-release product.

Irrigate according to soil texture and depth. The initial establishment is the only time you should irrigate frequently and shallowly. As grass becomes established, lengthen the time between irrigations and water deeper to encourage roots to grow more deeply. Apply water slowly. Watering quickly is one of the most common mistakes. If the water is not being absorbed by the soil, the grass can't use it and you are wasting water. If you see water runoff stop watering. Use a small spade to dig down to see whether the soil is saturated to 3-4" depth where the roots can use it.

During limited watering be sure to moisten the entire root zone. Remove thatch and aerate if needed to help water get to the roots. Do not fertilize during times of drought or no watering. Increase mowing height and control weeds. If you decide to let an area go dormant, do not put excessive traffic on the area or it will kill the grass crowns and the plant. High use areas should receive limited amounts of water to keep them alive.

Thatch is accumulated vegetative matter between the soil surface and the green vegetation. It occurs as a result of excess growth and a slower rate of decomposition. Some species (such as Kentucky Bluegrass and Fine Fescues) have a greater thatching tendency. More than ½ to ¾ inch of thatch is undesirable. The best time to thatch is in the spring or fall, when grass can actively grow in and recover before the summer and winter stress periods.

Aerating is used to reduce soil compaction. It increases soil oxygen and water penetration. It also encourages root growth, increases fertilizer movement in the soil and helps reduce thatch. It's good to apply fertilizer and lime at the time of aerification to get it right into the soil. Leave the cores on the surface and break them up. This allows the microorganisms in the cores to break down excessive thatch.

Right Plant/Right Place – Amy Ockerlander, Seattle Tilth

Step One – get to know your site. Look for wet or poorly drained areas, compacted soil that needs improvement, windy or exposed areas, steep slopes, sunny, shady or partial shade areas and "hot spots" south of walls or fences. Then draw a map of your site.

Step Two – dream a garden. Before choosing plants decide how you want to use your landscape and how much time you want to spend maintaining it. Create a wish list to help define your ideal landscape. Options to consider:

- Vegetable and herb gardens
- Food and water for birds, butterflies and other wildlife
- A sensory or cutting garden
- Low maintenance areas
- Screen for privacy
- Essential pathways
- Decks or patio areas

- Areas for play
- Areas for pets
- Storage, composting and work areas

Step Three – develop a plan. Choose plants that suit the conditions of your site and fulfill the needs of your wish list. Strive to include plants that: thrive without irrigation, are pest and disease-resistant, are native to the Northwest. Group plants by their water needs and use drip or soaker irrigation when possible. Plant practical lawns (sunny, level and of moderate size). Install raised beds or container gardens in areas of poor soil or amend your soil to improve it. Choose plants with multiple seasons of interest. Include conifers for winter greenery.

Remember to include trees. They help stabilize soil, prevent erosion and reduce stormwater runoff. They provide shelter and food for wildlife. They clean the air and cool the environment. Remember to choose trees that are the appropriate size for your landscape.

Step Four – give plants a good start by building a healthy soil, planting them correctly, mulching and watering wisely. Remember that new plants need more water until they are established.