

The Watering Can



By Beverly O'Keefe, URI Master Gardener

This morning the water in my watering can was frozen so I guess winter is finally settling in. Here in Rhode Island we have much to be thankful for – most especially our abundant water resources, which sustain our gardening endeavors. The current one hundred-year drought currently being experienced in the southeastern United States should remind us of the need to use sustainable gardening practices and, most especially, use water efficiently – both indoors and out. Water is not always in abundant supply.

Unfortunately, the autumn rains have not yet yielded a plentiful supply of water in the form of rain or snow. The National Weather Service lists Rhode Island in a “moderate drought” and, in fact, Rhode Island has been declared by the RI Drought Steering Committee to be in a “drought advisory” condition since October 10 (to the date of this posting on November 24) due to the lack of rainfall and decreasing levels of our ground water, surface water, and streamflow supplies. So, you say, who cares? Gardening is over for the year, and my watering can (or rain barrel) does not need to be refilled. But will the water be there to refill your watering can next summer?

Currently, Rhode Island has received 4 inches less rain than is normal for this time of year; temperatures have been higher than normal for this time of year and eight ground water observation wells, maintained by the U.S. Geological Survey, have gone “dry.” Eighteen additional wells located across the state are recording new low levels for this month, and for the year. The Scituate Reservoir is only two-thirds full (November is when the Scituate water levels are the lowest) and our smaller reservoirs, rivers, and streams continue to record new historical low levels. Of course, this could all change with a few deep rain storms – maybe.

Ground water wells take three to four months to “recharge,” meaning our public and private wells will be low through early spring at the very least. Right now there have been sporadic reports of private wells going dry – especially in South County, Exeter, and Richmond. Will we receive enough rain and snow to recharge our wells? Refill our reservoirs, lakes, and ponds?

Weather experts can tell us Rhode Island experiences a “drought” every 11 years or so, and then, once in a while, we also experience the “hundred year drought.” “Agricultural” droughts are short-term and typically occur during the growing season. A “hydrological” drought is more serious, takes longer to develop, and creates serious water availability problems. Long term droughts typically “set up” in the autumn, continue through the winter, and solidly take hold during the next summer. So what can you do?

The lesson here is to practice sustainability and take steps to use water efficiently both outdoors and indoors. Think about how much water you and your family use per day. The goal during the non-growing season is 71 gallons per person per day. During the growing season water use doubles and even triples in some areas and so my question to you would be “How much more water do you think you need to water your garden, lawn, and for recreational use during the summer months?” Is 20% more a reasonable figure? What sustainable horticultural practices can you learn about over the winter to help you be more efficient and sustainable?

Finally, with the holidays approaching, my favorite gift pick is a Rhode Island Water Lady Rain Barrel (ladyslip@verizon.net). Every family needs at least one to collect precious rainwater for the garden and the greatly discounted price of \$75 can not be beat. This holiday gift will be appreciated throughout the year especially during the growing season. Happy Holidays!