

The Watering Can



By Beverly O'Keefe, URI Master Gardener

Here in Rhode Island spring and fall can be very wet but in most years June, July, and August are very dry and gardeners can expect six to nine weeks of warm weather with less than a half-inch of precipitation a week. August is typically the "driest" month with little rain and hot, humid days...sometimes even the nights are warm. August is also the month when wells begin to go dry, public water supply restrictions are enforced, and watersheds begin to show signs of stress.

Luckily, so far this year frequent rain showers have provided some relief, with the NOAA National Weather Service reporting Rhode Island has received the "normal" amount of rainfall for the month. But "normal" doesn't tell the whole story. For example, for the last two months the South County area has received only 75% or less rainfall than is normal through July. In addition, the NOAA Drought Information Center Crop Moisture Index shows Rhode Island in an "abnormally dry" spell <http://www.drought.noaa.gov/>. The soil is dry and plants must have water to live.

On the other hand, record droughts and water shortages are occurring all along the Gulf Coast to the Sonoma Valley in California. The lack of "precipitation" has resulted in increased water restrictions and even outright bans on outdoor watering. Enforcement has been increased with high fines, neighborhood patrols, "Water Waster" hotlines, and even shutting off water service to violators. Ben Casselman, in an article entitled "Desperate Sprinklers" (Wall Street Journal, July 20, 2007), wrote about homeowners' efforts to continue to find and provide water to keep the grass green. Some homeowners create personal water reserves by digging wells or installing rain barrels and cisterns. Others are pumping water from backyard streams or even using reclaimed sewer water, which is becoming a more acceptable source for lawn watering but must be kept away from children. For example, the Jamestown Golf Course uses reclaimed sewer water from the Town's wastewater treatment plant to water the golf course.

As Master Gardeners we must learn about and find ways to "sustain our plants and lawn." Proper soil, nutrients, and adequate soil moisture are key "best gardening practices" and should be practiced. Gardeners can group plants based on water requirements and select drought-tolerant native species. Exotic species require a lot of water to maintain. There are many recommended practices for decreasing the amount of water needed to maintain your garden – seek out new information to prevent "water wasting." More importantly, share this information with neighbors and the community through the Master Gardener public outreach program. Participate in advanced education opportunities, join the Speaker's Bureau to help design and deliver "sustainable gardening" workshops, and start "harvesting your own rainwater" – it's free!