

HOME GARDEN WATER SAVINGS PROGRAM

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THE PROGRAM

IAL has funding to run a home garden water savings program in the Sydney region. The aim is to educate home gardeners on ways they can save water in the garden. The presentation to gardeners covers the varying water requirements of different types of soils and plants, the principles of good garden watering and the advantages of having a professionally designed irrigation system, albeit one that conforms to Sydney water restrictions (that at the time of writing only permits drip systems). Water tanks and greywater systems are also covered.

To date the presentations have been done via garden centres. This year we will be exploring different ways of reaching the gardening public, e.g. through garden clubs, local council garden or sustainability events. To date I have run each session in tandem with a member of IAL. I focus on the horticultural aspects (soil, plants) and waterwise products (water crystals, soil wetters), while the IAL member covers the essential elements and advantages of a well designed irrigation system. We encourage constant questions in order to get audience interaction.

IAL has been seeking funding to run this type of program in other states. By the time of the conference this may have been approved so that the lessons from the Sydney program will be useful for interstate programs

THE CHALLENGES

1. Understanding irrigation is complex. We need to simplify it so the general public can get a clear idea on how long and often they need to water to apply the minimum amount of water for plant survival.
2. And what is that amount? While Perth “experts” have come up with a “standard drink” that suits Perth’s universally sandy soil, Sydney soils vary from solid clay to virtual sand. Hence our emphasis on understanding **your** soil and coming up with an amount that suits **your** soil. Still, everyone wants a guideline figure or range, and our challenge has been to provide that.
3. Our message can appear contradictory to the messages conveyed by water restrictions. Sydney water restrictions permitted watering by hand held hose or drip irrigation before 10.00am and after 4.00pm two days per week. Many people watered their garden at these times simply because it was permitted, without any idea how to assess if their plants actually needed water. These talks help them make the assessment.
4. Not all professional (domestic garden) irrigators have the horticultural knowledge that will enable them to explain to the public how to make the assessment. Few of them have much experience in getting up in front of an audience to explain their expertise in irrigation technicalities. One challenge in running this program has been to encourage IAL members to participate; then to get them comfortable with fronting an audience and talking to the PowerPoint presentation that we use.
5. Another challenge has been to get that PowerPoint presentation right. I took over the program from a previous incumbent and have refined (improved, I hope) the PowerPoint after each presentation. This is ongoing.
6. The IAL leaflet ‘Your Guide to Good Garden Watering’ is distributed to all attendees and was initially the basis of the presentation. However I feel that some of its content was overly complicated and that one section in particular was incomprehensible. If neither I nor the IAL presenters could understand it, how one earth could we expect the general public to understand it? As part of this project I am revamping the brochure.
7. Getting good attendance at the water savings presentations is another challenge. The first presentations were done at Sydney’s top garden centres. The owners of these nurseries put a lot of effort into publicising and running the seminar. Once you get beyond the top 5 or 6 nurseries the efforts made by second tier garden centres varies enormously, resulting in an audience that varied from 3 to 60 people! Lesson – I now do the promotion myself. PR happens to be my area of expertise, so this is the relatively easy part of my task.

8. But we are running out of 2nd tier nurseries, with several of these in Sydney having closed down in the last 12-18 months due to drought. So we are looking at new ways of reaching home gardeners.
9. As I write this precise Sydney Water is about to lift water restrictions, as our dam levels reach 70%. This program is funded for another two years, so a new challenge will be to get both the general public and garden centres to accept that water saving in the garden remains important.