 **Landcare Broken Hill Inc**

***Greening the Hill Mk.2***

ABC Radio interview No.29 – 12 November 2019

**BEING WATER-WISE**

It looks as though the hot season in Broken Hill, indeed across Australia, is going to be extreme this year. The terrible bushfires, so early in the season, is a sure indicator of what lies ahead. So today’s discussion is about being water-wise.

So I thought it would be good to talk about some of the steps we can all take to be ‘water-wise’. This month the **Australian Consumers’ Association** published an article in their monthly community magazine “Choice” about all the steps we can take.

**Inside: Adopting wise water use practices in the home**

**Appliances**

The first thing we can do is to ensure that our water-using appliances such as clothes washers and dish washers use water efficiently, which means they do what they need to do – wash – but they do it frugally.

**Practical measures indoors**

Some people have their plumbing set up so that their used water, called ‘grey water’, is either diverted to where it can be reused, say in garden beds, or into collection tanks, greywater tanks, so that it can settle and then be reused when you need to, say on the naturestrip or in one’s garden. **Diverting grey water for re-use is sensible** if you don’t know where your greatest need is at any particular stage: some areas of your garden may be more parched than others, so you need to run your hose from the diversion tank to that place. Others are too busy during the working week, so need to store their grey water for reuse during the weekend or in the afternoons.

If you don’t yet have a grey water diverter, there are lots of way you can collect water for re-use in the house. Some people catch the water they use in their handbasins by placing a plastic removable basin inside their usual ceramic basin. The plastic basin is left in place until it is ready to be manually removed and carried out to some loved plant in need of water outside. It may sound tedious, but once one gets in the habit, it is easy. After people in the household wash their hands over the course of the day, you soon realise just how much water we waste going down the drain.

Modifying your washing practises is also wise. A simple thing like putting the plug in the basin helps: you simply wash in the trapped water, rather than keeping the tap running. The same goes for washing your teeth: none of us need to keep the tap running whilst washing your teeth, but so many of us have in the past fallen into that wasteful habit.

Similarly, rinsing dishes under a running tap before placing them in the dishwasher wastes a huge amount of water. The alternative is simply to have a large bowl filled with rinsing water into which you dip the dishes – after all, the dishwasher will remove the rest.

Many people on drought cursed farms actually shower over buckets, catching their shower water. At the end of the shower one simply carries the bucket out to the garden to help keep some part of it alive. I know it sounds tedious, but once one collects about 4 buckets from your shower recess and spreads it on the garden, it is amazing how much of a difference it makes. It would all be wasted. So it is worth thinking about.

**Audit the water use of your appliances**

Modern appliance standards require dishwashers and clothes washers to state a water use rating: how much water they use with a standard wash. If you live in place like Broken Hill, the most water efficient appliances should be our preferred choice. If you can afford it, change over your appliances to more efficient models.

Many tap and shower fittings can be modified by changing over the tap or shower head. With modern fittings you can obtain just as good a washing effect without using as much water. There have been many government schemes in recent years that have subsidised the changeover of such fittings. I know that has happened through the major Australian cities, but I’m not sure where Broken Hill has yet had such a scheme operating here. But even if it hasn’t been available here, a small outlay on a new fitting might over time save much on water bills through otherwise excessive water usage.

**Car washing**

Cash washing has been subject to water restrictions in many parts of Australia. But if you still can car wash, then my suggestion is do it with a bucket and sponge and a hose with a trigger nozzel. Further, if you can, wash the car in a place where the runoff water might benefit the garden: so if you have a lawn and you can drive your car onto to the lawn, that’s the place to water your car, rather than on the driveway. Simple measures like that can make a noticeable difference.

Further, I understand that commercial car washing places are far more efficient users of water than car washing on your own property. Most such places require that they recycle their water, thereby reducing their overall use of water. I’m not sure whether that requirement applies to such places in Broken Hill, but they certainly do throughout the major cities.

**Water tanks**

As I’ve often said before, we all need to install water tanks if we can. The difficulty here in our extreme weather conditions is whether we’ll get meaningful rain again? But we should be prepared in case we do. We also need the State Government to step up to the mark and reintroduce a subsidy scheme to assist people to buy water tanks.

**Outside: Adopting wise water use practices in the garden**

**Timing**. The best time to water your garden is at times when it is least hot and least sunny. So you should never put your sprinklers on during the warm parts of the day – and that includes when you’re reusing your grey water. It is just a waste, as the water will simply evaporate in to the air, depriving the plants of the water they need. So if you have timers of your taps, have them set for overnight, the very early morning or the last evening.

**Drippers.** How you deliver the water to the plants that need it is an important issue. Rather than just spread your water delivery around, you should target it to where it should go. A spray system or a quick manual spray may be necessary in circumstances where you need to remove the dust off your vegetable gardens after a Broken Hill dust storm, but most of the time a targeted delivery of water via drippers rather than a spray is best. You can then ensure the plant or place of greatest water need gets the drip.

A tip: a dripper system needs to regularly checked to make sure it is delivering water. In our region **we have a variety of ant – I’ll call it a mud ant – that loves to clog up the dripper** outlets. They literally use mud to make a plug which they build within the dripper line. Sooner rather than later you can quite quickly find that at least half your outlets are blocked preventing delivery of water. Before you know it, many of the plants you’re trying to water show signs of stress due to lack of water. So at least once a week check all your dripper outlets and use a pin or a thin nail to breakthrough the ants’ plug so as to release the water. (Also there is now available a different type of dripper polytube which does not attract the ants so much – a brown dripper tube does not attract the ants, whereas the usual black dripper tube does. Why, I have no idea! But look for the brown dripper tubes).

**Keeping water in the ground.** A key issue in the Arid Zone such in Broken Hill is to keep moisture in then ground. So the need is to shade the ground and cover the surface. The more exposed the soil, the more moisture you’ll loose and the more the near-surface roots of the plants will be ‘cooked’.

So one obvious step is to plant **more shade-providing plants**. A shady garden will generally retain far more of the moisture you put in the ground. In the Broken Hill region, the more trees and shrubs you can fit into your garden then the cooler your garden will be: it actually has a micro-climate effect, generating its own beneficial environment. A benefit is that it traps more moisture.

Also, closer to the ground, grow **groundcover creepers** throughout your garden. Even though such plants will need water themselves, they have the benefit of simultaneously shading the surface. They also collect and build up mulch-like material under their cover, which in turn retains moisture.

As I’ve often said before, **mulching** is a sure way to keep moisture in the ground. Mulch is simply shredded organic material. Although it would be best to mulch your whole garden, if you haven’t got enough available, then at least mulch around all plants, such as trees and shrubs, to the out perimeter of the drip-line, that is, the further reaches of the tree or shrub canopy. More often than not, the above ground canopy will be matched by the below-ground spread of roots and it is these roots that need to watered and kept as moist as possible by spreading mulch. I’ve found that a good mulch is organic material such as pea-straw, (this is the husk and waste material bundled up by pea growers which is available from commercial suppliers) – although there are a great range of mulching materials available. In the Broken Hill district, given our extreme hot season temperatures, mulching to a depth of about 10 to 15cm (4 to 6 inches) is best.

Changing your behaviour to so-called green waste is sensible. **Rarely will cut off tree plants and dead plant material really be waste**. With access to a shredder, all such material can become a valuable resource. It is sad to see people having their green offcuts taken to the Council tip rather than being reused a valuable mulch. Knowing that many people can’t afford their own mulcher, Landcare is keen to see if we can identify a way by which some communal mulcher can be bought for the Broken Hill community and used, via rotation from street to street, for people to reuse this valuable mulching material in their own gardens.

The MOST disastrous approach to maintaining your garden is to look on leaves and ground-covering material as messy or garden litter. **Avoid a raked bare garden**. If I see a raked garden area, taken back to bare earth, I immediately see a landowner that doesn’t care about water-saving, or who wants to keep paying out more on water bills and who doesn’t know how to achieve a cooler micro-climate. Such approaches, I think, are sad as these people don’t know what they are missing out on. Adopting a different approach, they could soon end up with beautiful garden and, quite possibly, cost them less on water charges.

**The next public meeting of Landcare Broken Hill will be**

**at the Centre for Community, 200 Beryl Street, Thursday 28 November 7.00pm**

**when we will discussing the plans for *GREENING THE HILL MK2* in 2020**

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