



Gardener promotes value of mulch

SMART WATERING CASE STUDY: FELICITY STACEY-CLARK

Ashburton journalist Felicity Stacey-Clark doesn't consider herself an expert gardener but she enjoys asking questions. In January 2015, the newspaper columnist posed two questions that nearly every Cantabrian wrestles with over summer. Why do farmers operate irrigators during dry, hot nor-westerly conditions? Further she wanted to know why farmers were still allowed to irrigate when town gardeners – like her elderly parents and herself – had to contend with hosing restrictions. IrrigationNZ responded and Felicity was pleasantly surprised with the response. Her next column acknowledged this.

"I've had conversations with various people over the years and not one has bothered or been able to answer this one. Now I know, and not only that, I am a lot clearer about how the water is allocated and managed. It makes far more sense for there to be a bigger picture of water management, and calculations, than for individual farmers to be running out watering as and where they felt like watering."

Ten months on, Felicity is back in her garden. She remembers getting hot under the collar about irrigators. "It really got me worked up, especially when you drive along State Highway 1 on a hot windy day and see irrigators going flat tack. I couldn't see the point of it. However, to some extent I think it happens in home gardens as well."

She was motivated to write the column on behalf of her parents who were struggling with the requirement to only water their garden at night, once a certain level of water restriction took effect.

"I didn't like the idea of a fixed time, especially for mum and dad. It was too difficult for them to be out in the garden that late."

Recent news that Ashburton District Council has lifted its water restriction regime for the coming summer in favour of the educational campaign, SMART Watering, is a good move in her eyes.

"You don't actually have to use a helluva lot of water. A lot of it is about mulching which can be done in many ways. I mulch using newspapers and mulch, but others use pea straw."

Felicity says if you put a layer of mulch over your garden once you've watered early morning it will retain a lot of the soil's moisture, potentially for weeks. She also advocates reviewing how your garden works to rein in water use. "If you're going to use sprinklers or an irrigation system, you've got to have a plan around how you get the best coverage. You can put in an hour's watering that may last your garden for two to three months with mulching."

While overall gardeners locally seem to be moving to less labour-intensive gardens, Felicity suspects there will still be some resistance towards using mulch based on aesthetic concerns.

"People who have really flash gardens are probably quite alert to what they need to do. But mulching doesn't always work for them. But there are other options like cocoa husks. On the flip side, those gardens that are winning prizes now are well planned and new and there's a move towards natives. Not like years ago when people put hundreds of annuals in. These people are more likely to be mulching."

Felicity thinks lifting water restrictions in favour of promoting efficient use of water will work well for the district's older population.

"I think lifting water restrictions will be good for mum and dad, the older audience. They are more likely to put the hose on first thing in the morning, as I do, away from the midday heat."

Felicity says she will watch the situation with interest and hopes local gardeners respond to the cues to change their watering practices.

"It will be interesting. It's going to get worse this whole water situation. If we don't start learning how to use it there's going to be a whole new look around gardens in Mid Canterbury."

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