

“DROP YOUR WATER USE” PLANT TAGGING PROGRAM DESCRIPTION TUCSON, ARIZONA

INTRODUCTION

The Tucson office of the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) has developed a nursery program, “Drop Your Water Use”, to educate retail nursery customers on how to plan and maintain a healthy and water efficient landscape. The program is a voluntary collaboration between ADWR and local nurseries that uses a simple water drop system to identify plants with similar water requirements. After years of educating the public of the need to irrigate efficiently and to group plants by water use, it became apparent that effective zoning was easier said than done. Even among low-water-use plants there were differences in water use requirements and irrigation frequency. Homeowners and landscape professionals needed a simple way to identify plants in order to group them into water use zones.

The “Drop Your Water Use” plant-tagging program was developed to synthesize a very complicated process into a simple method for identifying low-water-use plants that would have similar irrigation frequency, therefore allowing them to be grouped into zones more effectively and irrigated with separate valves. All of the labeled plants are Xeriscape plants currently on the Tucson Low Water Use/ Drought Tolerant plant list, which was the basis for this pilot program.

In Tucson many retail nurseries have signed up for the program. ADWR is working with other nurseries to encourage their participation. Several wholesale nurseries in Phoenix and Tucson are also participating in the program by adding water drop symbols to their labels on plants to be sold in Tucson. Retail nurseries that participate receive free posters, water drop stickers for their signage and handouts explaining the program and watering guidelines for their customers. In addition, all participating nurseries are listed on the ADWR website and are promoted at community events.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENT THE PROGRAM

Step 1: Develop a local low water use/drought tolerant plant list

- 1) Establish a plant list advisory committee consisting of local plant experts to evaluate plants for inclusion on a low water use/ drought tolerant plant list. This advisory group can assist the jurisdiction or entity in charge, with continued development and maintenance of the list and provide guidance on any future additions or deletions. The advisory group can also assist in determining what additional information should be maintained on the local list. For example, plant type (tree, shrub, groundcover, etc.); mature height and width of canopy; allergenicity; cold hardiness; native or non native; origin; bloom color; bloom season; toxicity; invasiveness; growing season, etc. This information can be developed and added over time.

Or, obtain and use a list already developed for a similar area (wording could be better). The list should be developed and maintained in a database to allow for easy updates and queries. You can view example plants lists on ADWR’s conservation web site:
<http://www.azwater.gov/azdwr/WaterManagement/AMAs/LowWaterUsePlantList.htm>

- 2) Once plants have been evaluated and approved, the advisory group would evaluate each plant and assign a plant water-use number based on required irrigation frequency. These

numbers become the basis for labeling plants with the water drop icons. **It is very important that any plant already assigned a water-use-number for the plant tagging program, in any other area of the State maintain the same number on the newly developed plant lists.** Therefore, this component would need to be evaluated for consistency throughout Arizona by ADWR conservation staff, or other qualified experts willing to compare the lists. Wholesale nurseries that are participating in the labeling should have consistent numbers for the same plants to make the labeling process less labor intensive and easier to maintain.

Step 2: Obtain wholesale nursery participation

- 1) Contact local and statewide nursery organizations to develop partnerships and provide assistance in implementing the program (e.g. the Arizona Nursery Association). Working with these professional groups not only adds credibility to the program but often they are willing to provide help with contacting and setting up meetings with wholesale nurseries to determine interest. In order for the program to move forward, there must be a commitment by several major wholesale nurseries that supply the plants on the regional low-water-use plant list for your area and willingness to incorporate the icons on their labels.
- 2) It is important to note the necessity of incorporating the water drop icon onto the same plant label currently provided by the wholesale nursery, rather than as a separate label. This will ensure that the labeling information will continue to be placed on the containers without additional work by retail nursery staff. Staff would otherwise have to look up the water use number for each plant and place an additional label on each plant pot. This extra effort would add a level of complexity that would likely lead to the demise of the tagging program.

Wholesale Labeling

- 1) The low water use/drought tolerant plant list “water-use-numbers” serve as the basis for labels one through three, distinguished with corresponding water drops and numbers. In Tucson for example, “number one”  indicates **very low** water use—mostly native Sonoran and Chihuahuan desert plants, two  is **low** water use and three  is **moderate** water use. By choosing plants with the same number a gardener can more successfully select and group plants by water use requirements. Although the plants are all low-water-using, the frequency that they need to be irrigated under normal climatic conditions in Tucson varies from approximately once a week to once a month after the plants are established (in about 2-3 years). ADWR hopes that consumers will use separate valves on their irrigation system to water each zone, enabling them to manage their irrigation water use more efficiently.

Step 3: Solicit retail nursery participation

- 1) Meet with a representative group of retail nurseries in your area to determine interest in the program and their willingness to participate in the plant tagging program.
- 2) If it is determined that there is enough support and interest in the program, the next step is to set up a meeting and invite all local retail nurseries to attend. The purpose of the meeting would be to explain the program and sign up nurseries to participate. In this meeting or in a subsequent meeting it is important to determine what marketing and

customer information they would like developed to promote the program. Nurseries will vary widely as far as nursery layouts, clientele and staffing levels are concerned. These differences can create a challenge for those in charge of implementing the program. As is often the case in retail sales, there is a fair amount of staff turnover and differing levels of knowledge about the cultural requirements of the plants they are selling. Some organize plants by type (e.g. groundcovers, shrubs and trees), others alphabetically by botanical name, or often plants that are in bloom are located in the front of the nursery to encourage impulse sales regardless of water use.

Step 4; Modifiy and develop regional materials

With the hope that the program could expand to other metropolitan areas throughout Arizona, an effort was made to develop marketing materials that incorporated color schemes and graphics from programs underway in Phoenix, Tucson and other parts of the state with similar climatic conditions. Based on input from participating nurseries, graphics and support materials can be modified or developed to meet local needs.

The program intent is to label only low-water-use plants. Within each Active Management Area (AMA) in the state, ADWR has a corresponding plant list and is charged with both encouraging, and in some instances, regulating water use reductions. One marketing component requested by nurseries that has yet to be fully embraced is the labeling of high-water-use plants. It is clearly out of the purview of ADWR to develop a list of high-water-use plants. Therefore, the task of developing a hierarchal list for this purpose would fall to nurseries or plant experts. However, since high-water-use plants will continue to be available, an increased effort will be required to educate nursery staff and their customers on the differences in cultural requirements of these plants e.g. soil with higher organic content, fertilization and frequent irrigation.

Step 5: Consumer education

At the request of retail nurseries, ADWR developed information that can be easily reproduced to provide retail nursery customers with copies of the plant list. Several handouts were developed - one describes the "[Drop Your Water Use](#)" plant tagging program and its water conservation benefits; another entitled "[How Much and How Often to Water](#)" describes root zones, soils and microclimate differences and how that affects irrigation frequency and quantity. These materials were developed and reviewed by the participating retail nurseries prior to printing and distributing them. Where applicable, these materials can be used or modified for each region participating in the "Drop Your Water Use Program".

In order for a program such as this to succeed and continue, it must be perceived as a benefit to the participating nurseries and their customers. The fact that nurseries in Tucson are expending their own money and staff resources to label the plants at the wholesale and retail levels bodes well for its continued success.

Program Costs

The total cost to establish and promote the program in the entire Tucson area has been approximately \$5,000, not including ADWR staff time and the in-house printing of educational and marketing materials. In addition, local water providers and *Tucson Home Magazine* have promoted the program at no cost to ADWR. Participating retail nurseries have been pleased with the program overall, and have indicated the program materials and labeling have resulted

in an unexpected benefit: a “silent sales person.” Retail nurseries, especially independent nurseries, usually have a limited number of staff persons. Therefore, rather than have customers wait to speak with a lone staff person, they can quickly describe the labeling program and send customers into the nursery on their own to choose plants.

Program Expansion

Follow-up with participating nurseries continues with an eye toward making the program more visible, and to look for additional promotional opportunities and partnerships, to advertise the program, and potentially do some staff training. There may also be opportunities to educate local landscape professionals and their crews on the program so they can use the labeling system as a basis for design and installation. In turn sales could increase by educating their clients on the water saving benefits of an efficient irrigation system, as well as the benefit to their landscape in terms of plant health.