

Surviving the Drought

We scan the skies for rain clouds...most of the time there aren't any. The level of water in our lakes, ponds and ditches is dropping at an alarming rate, and we worry about the elegant water birds and the quirky gators in East Lake Woodlands, hoping they will be able to get to deeper water in a crisis.

Yes, we all know that this part of Florida is experiencing a severe drought (though the drought of 2009 was worse). And we know that East Lake Woodlands Water, LLC has been forced to turn off water to our underground sprinkling system every other week (the week of May 15 was the first), while allowing hand watering of new or valuable plants.

But some of us may not know that there are restrictions on the use of **potable** water, too: the water that comes out of indoor and outdoor faucets and wells, in addition to water taken from any lake or pond. These restrictions have been established by the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD, usually referred to as "Swifmud"), a state agency, and are enforced by Pinellas County Utilities. According to Shannon Ransom, Water Conservation Compliance Supervisor for Pinellas County Utilities (supplier of ELW's potable water), a water conservation regulation is in effect **year-round**: sprinkling is limited to twice a week with a weekly total of one inch. Dwellings with even addresses may irrigate on Thursday and/or Sunday, those with odd addresses on Wednesday and/or Saturday, and only before 10 am or after 4 pm. This is unless a community, such as East Lake Woodlands, has established a different twice-a-week schedule via a SWFWMD Variance or has stricter regulations due to its irrigation source, as is now the case throughout ELW. Hand watering and micro-irrigation of plants, **but not lawns**, can be done on any day and at any time, if needed.

Because of the current drought, SWFWMD implemented a Phase 1 Water Shortage Order on May 8; this will be in place until July 1. "Citizens actually don't see any difference in the restrictions," says Ransom. "Rather, Phase 1 is formal notification that water flows are becoming limited and that all 'wasteful and unnecessary water use' is prohibited. You can wash your car, for example, but not every day and only with an automatic shutoff nozzle. You should not power wash your house unless needed for necessary repairs, allow a water softener leak to continue, allow broken sprinkler heads to leak or gush water, and so forth. It is a notice to start conserving water."

PENALTIES FOR VIOLATING THE WATER RESTRICTIONS

As Ransom's title implies, compliance with the year-round water conservation regulations is enforced. In unincorporated areas of the county such as ELW, compliance officers patrol day and night, even at midnight or 2 am. For a first violation, Pinellas County Utilities issues a warning. For second and additional violations, there is a citation and a \$193.00 fine. (If a resident chooses to plead not guilty, he or she must appear in court.)

If the drought worsens, SWFWMD can declare a Phase 2, 3 or 4 Water Shortage Order. Phase 3 limits irrigation to one day a week, and even a first violation brings about a fine of \$193.00. In 2009, southwest Florida was in a Phase 4 Water Shortage Order, which limited irrigation to four hours a day once a week: before 4 am on your authorized day.

ELW Water's website, too, warns that "more stringent" measures will be taken if the drought worsens or the current restrictions are insufficient.

On a more positive note, the University of Florida IFAS Extension has published tips for keeping your lawns and gardens **healthy** during the drought. Not mowing, using mulch, removing weeds, and thinning crowded beds or pruning plants can all help.

http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/hot_topics/lawn_and_garden/drought.shtml

WHY THE ADDITIONAL RESTRICTIONS IN EAST LAKE WOODLANDS

A spokesperson for East Lake Woodlands Water (ELW Water) explains that it became necessary to take the additional step of shutting down all irrigation every other week because of "illegal watering" by single-family homeowners in East Lake Woodlands. "Too many people were changing their irrigation system timers in order to water their properties more often, sometimes every day," says the spokesperson. Another company employee has said that at the end of April, the pressure in some pump houses in ELW had fallen from 70 pounds per cubic inch to 50 pounds, thereby lessening the force of the water coming from sprinkler heads. Due to the every-other-week irrigation schedule, however, the water pressure in the pump house that serves Quail Forest has returned to full pressure.

"The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission [a division of the Florida Department of Health] has also put pressure on us to mediate the water levels in retention ponds and lakes in order to protect wildlife," says ELW Water. "We have to think about the animals that depend on our water sources, too."

EXCEPTIONS

There are exceptions to ELW Water's strict on-and-off-week schedule and the County's and SWFWMD's regulations. For example, Quail Forest residents may hand water new plantings any day of the week for the first 30 days, before 10 am or after 4 pm. Days 31 to 60, hand watering is allowed three days a week, following Pinellas County's Utilities' even/odd house number schedule. Plantings that are particularly valuable may also be hand watered on any day or at any time.

For Pinellas County Utilities' regulations, including exceptions and phone numbers, here are helpful websites:

<http://www.pinellascounty.org/utilities/water-restrict.htm>

www.pinellascounty.org/utilities/water-restrict.htm#basicrules

The State's regulations for our water management district can be found at:
www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/conservations/restrictions/swfwmd.php

GUIDELINES FOR THE FUTURE

ELW Water warns that even when the rainy season starts, probably in June, it will be necessary to keep the strict water restrictions in place for several more weeks to allow water sources to recover. We are also reminded that Florida is very dry every spring, so we should avoid unnecessary use of water every March to mid-June.

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