

Water-Wise Water Features

By Rachel Oppedahl

Other than the decorative bowl on my deck railing that I refill with water for the birds each morning, I do not have a single "water feature" on my property — yet. Until recently, the idea of installing a babbling fountain or digging and maintaining a pond in my hot, dry, Sierra Foothills yard seemed unconscionable. What a waste of dwindling water resources, right?

Well, I've learned that is not necessarily the case. The happy truth is, water features done right can benefit wildlife — and the humans who enjoy both — without wasting water. The tricks are: 1) common sense and humility, and 2) learning the art of wise design.

Common sense and... humility? You bet. First and foremost, simply do not hook up a water feature to the main water line and run it constantly. Instead, create any water feature so that it recycles its own water, which is only occasionally replenished by you.

Now for the art of water-wise design. It lies in doing everything you can to minimize evaporation and unnecessary water loss. Here are some helpful tips:

Design it to minimize splashing and spraying. A large, fast-moving waterfall or a fountain that sprays far into the air wastes a lot of precious water to evaporation. Think trickle as opposed to torrent. In that vein, consider using bubblers or spouts rather than jets to create soothing movement and sound.

Locate it in shade or semi-shade. The rate of evaporation will be lower if your water feature is not situated in full sun. If a sunny spot is your only option, slow down water evaporation by incorporating an overhang to shade a fountain; or for a pond, float aquatic plants, such as lilies, to help reduce sun and heat at the water surface.

Block the breeze. Wind is another force of nature that increases the rate of evaporation, so if you want a water feature in an area that gets a lot of it, consider adding a windbreak. Arrange native shrubs, constructed barriers or even large-scale garden art to protect your water feature from drying winds.

Remember: Deeper is better. Whether you want a pond or a multi-level watercourse, the deeper the water in each "container," the slower the rate of evaporation. Shallow water heats up and loses water very quickly, especially if located in full sun.

Keep it leak free. A water feature with a leak not only wastes a precious resource, but also means you have to go to the trouble of refilling it more often. Insist on leak-proof construction and keep an eye on the water level so you can quickly spot unusual water loss.

Let Mother Nature do the cleaning. For a wildlife pond, add plants that act as natural biological filters to keep water clear and eliminate the need to empty it for mechanical cleaning.

Move that water wisely. Take time to decide which product is best for your project. For example, pump size should be appropriate so it does the job without overdoing it. And then there is the smart design two-fer: a solar-powered pump!

Make sure the timing is right. Moving water evaporates faster than still water. If your feature doesn't contain plant or aquatic life that needs continuous aeration, save water and energy by installing a timer so it runs only when you are there to enjoy it.

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Want to learn more about wise water use in the garden? The UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners can help. Get free advice by calling the Tuolumne County Master Gardener Hotline, 209.533.5912, or by emailing mgtuolumne@ucdavis.edu.