

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 water in our arid summer landscapes, 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 trick is twofold. First, design a water feature so that—as much as possible—it recycles its own water, and is only occasionally replenished by you. Second, do everything you can to minimize evaporation and unnecessary water loss.

Here are the best tips I found:

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 valuable 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.

Design it for efficient water flow. 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. Or, consider installing a smart design two-fer: a solar-powered pump! Also, remember that 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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