

IRRIGATION OF THE NATION

How people use water, especially in their gardens, could affect future water and drought management

UNDERSTANDING THE WAY that people use water is becoming increasingly important in Britain. In 2011/2012 droughts threatened many parts of England, and highlighted the vulnerability of Britain to water shortages and climate change as well as population and other social changes.

Research by Alison Browne (Sustainable Consumption Institute, Manchester University) and Martin Pullinger, Will Medd and Ben Anderson (Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University) looks broadly at how people use water. Through a 1,800-person questionnaire across the South and South East of

England the research team also reveals the ways that water use is embedded in everyday lives and examines what people do in their kitchens, bathrooms, toilets, laundries and gardens.

KEY FACT

MORE PEOPLE WATER WITH A WATERING CAN OR BUCKET THAN ANY OTHER METHOD

The results suggest that hosepipe bans and garden water use may be less relevant to management of water supplies and drought alleviation than is often thought. The research found that for people who have a garden

(nearly 40 per cent of people have no outdoor plants or lawn to water), most water it based on a weather variant pattern (some measure or proxy of how dry things have got) or a simple regular schedule. And low-tech rules: more people water plants, flowers, lawn, fruit and vegetables with a watering can or bucket than any other method.

The analysis revealed five different types of

gardeners. The amateur enthusiasts generally water gardens with low technology (buckets, watering cans, water butts) and are enthusiastic garden users, seeing the garden as a place for

fruit/vegetables, flowers/plants, an outdoor living area and a place for birds and wildlife. They are likely to plant annuals, bedding plants and wash garden furniture/paths in the summer months. This group represents seven per cent of those who have a garden (four per cent of all households).

The casual gardeners are gardeners who water their outdoor areas with low technology solutions but always from the mains supply, and are likely to see their garden as a place for flowers and plants only. This group represents 29 per cent of garden owners (19 per cent of all). The green-fingered gardeners also use a low-tech watering system but almost always from a water butt or water recycled from inside the home. These gardeners see their garden strongly as places for fruit and vegetables, flowers and wildlife. They plant annuals in the spring but tend not to do any other preparations. This group represents nine per cent of garden owners (six per cent of all).

The hands-off gardeners do not water the garden at all. They are more likely to see the garden as a place 'still being developed', are less likely to see it as an outdoor living area, but do tend to tidy the area up in springtime. They represent 29 per cent of garden owners (19 per cent of all).

The high-tech enthusiasts make up a large and active set of gardeners (26 per cent of those with gardens but still only 16 per cent of all households). They water from the mains, but usually are more 'high tech' using hosepipes, sprinklers and irrigation systems. They tend to water because of the weather and on a regular schedule. In springtime they tidy and plant annuals.

This research highlights the diversity of ways that people use water in their homes and also how the same volume of water can be used by different households in many different ways. The research team works collaboratively with a range of NGO, policy and business stakeholders and plans to use the research findings to shape government policy on water use, and assist water companies in their water efficiency and water supply management programmes. For more information a full report is available at www.springerlink.com/content/136727818516705v ■

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Are you a low-tech gardener who uses a watering can?