

A Gray Area: Reusing Household Water in Your Garden

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If you have been putting off setting up plumbing to reuse some of your household water, know that using gray water is getting easier! In order to promote water conservation, the California Plumbing Code and Marin County agencies have been rewriting rules to allow us to use this water for landscape irrigation. Gray water systems are not common in the Corte Madera Creek Watershed, in part because regulations have been changing. But in their simplest form, gray water systems offer an easy, cheap, safe alternative source of irrigation water.

“Gray water” is untreated household wastewater from bathtubs, showers, bathroom sinks, and laundry facilities. “Black water” is considered wastewater from toilets and kitchen sinks, and requires treatment by a sewer or septic system. Chapter 16 of the state plumbing code defines three tiers of gray water system with unique requirements. The most basic gray water use is a connection from a clothes washing machine, producing less than 15 gallons of gray water per day per occupant. This water could be going straight to your garden. According to the regulations, you can construct these without a permit. Check with your local municipality about anything more involved, such as any alteration to your existing plumbing, use of shower or bathroom sink water, or multi-unit systems.

Does your washer discharge in a u-shaped hook to a vented stem of the septic system? If so, consider installing an alternative drain stem that flows to the yard. You can easily switch back to the septic drain if you are washing diapers, infected clothes, hazardous chemicals, or anything else you don’t want in your soil. Discharge the gray water pipe via gravity to an outdoor area where soaps can aerate and biodegrade without human contact. This can be done effectively with perforated pipe into a mulch pile. Under the mulch, excavate a depression where the gray water will soak in. Unlike in the case of rain gardens, it is very important that gray water doesn’t discharge to storm drains or the creek.

Gray water systems work best for perennial landscaping including fruit trees; do not water plants whose edible portions could come in contact with the water.

Local plumbers may or may not be familiar with installing these systems, but there are many good resources available on the internet. Your local municipality or Marin County Department of Public Health also have useful information.

I am going to install one of these systems in my side yard and I hope my neighbors do to: I am excited to see these systems in place, greening our landscapes even in times of water shortage.

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