

OPINION

Drought's a lesson for water hogs

Wake-up call: Current water restrictions are good training to up our conservation game

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Living here in the Lower Mainland, we can, at least until now, be forgiven for taking our water for granted.

This is a climate where, for most of the year, women in heels sink in soggy boulevards and a blowout lasts a day or two before the humidity plumps the hair back to its normal state of frizz.

It is a climate where cars have squeegees in the back hatch, and umbrella stands in bars overflow on Friday nights.

A climate so wet that even dog owners who eschew cutesy pet outfits eventually break down and buy their dog a waterproof jacket.

A climate where your most-treasured business card is the roofing company that knows what they are doing and charges a fair price. In November, the month that ushers in winter with wave after wave of storms, puddles on leaf-clogged corners grow too wide to jump across.

In a typical year, we get 185 mm, more than half a foot, of rain in November, followed by a steady pour for three more interminable months until things settle down in April. The Canadian Climate Normals charts tell us that at least some rain will fall for 165.1 days, more than one in three.

All this explains the shock we all feel now that we are running out of water. Overnight, it seems, water went from being a nuisance to a precious and scarce commodity as Western Canada joined its drought-stricken neighbours in the United States.

Until this summer, I have not been much of a water conservationist.

Oh sure, I don't run the tap while I brush my teeth, but I



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After Vancouverites, who normally get 185 mm of rain annually, get over the shock of the current drought, they may learn about conservation.

indulge in long hot showers in the winter and water the garden liberally during the usual August dry spell.

But as we approached Stage 3 water restrictions, my family started to take stock of what goes down the drain.

Just to see how much we could save, we started washing fruits and vegetables in a basin and using the water to rinse soapy dishes after the cleanup. Add in leftover coffee and tea and it adds up to a surprising two basins a meal, enough to water all the outside potted plants as well as a few shrubs.

Instead of showers, we switched to baths and now siphon the water from an upstairs porch into a rain barrel outside. The 75-gallon rain barrel, which always seemed enormous, filled in less than a week. This is water that can be used guilt-free to water trees and flowers.

The first step to conservation is realizing exactly how much of any resource is squandered. Start saving your vegetable peelings, and you realize how many food scraps can become useful compost. Start saving your grey water, and you quickly see how many buckets normally run right

down the drain.

Canadians use an average of 350 litres of water a day, and Metro residents are on the upper end of that with an average daily per capita use of 470 litres.

Compare that to Europe, which has long dealt with water scarcity and has brought its average per capita use down to about 150 litres per day.

Only the Americans beat us in the water consumption department, and they too now concede it's time to cut back.

Whether this summer's drought is an anomaly or a harbinger of future supply under

climate change, the new water restrictions are good training.

We know we won't be able to rely on glacial melt to top up the reservoirs much longer. And if the predictions are true, these El Niño summers will become more common.

Instead of building the reservoirs higher, as some will undoubtedly say we should after this summer of restraint, we should look to Europe and up our conservation game. It wouldn't take much for us to do a whole lot better.

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