

# GETTING SMARTER ALL THE TIME

Smart controllers are brainy irrigation clocks that apply exactly the right amount of water based on the previous day's weather.



**I**n the '80s we called it xeriscaping: using drought tolerant plant material and efficient irrigation to save water. We've come a long way, baby, since the days of cactus and decorative rock. Now, 20 years later, water prices are going up, water supply is going down, and new legislation is going into effect to force us to use less water.

Water conservation and water conserving landscaping is not just a trend, it is a necessity.

In September 2004, the Governor approved a new bill, AB2717. This new legislation directs the Department of Water Resources to develop a Task Force, which will formulate recommendations for landscape water use efficiency. These improvements will help ensure a reliable water supply for the state, as well as reduce environmental damage.

July 2006 is the target for implementation of these new recommendations, with local water agencies responsible for issuing enforcement penalties.

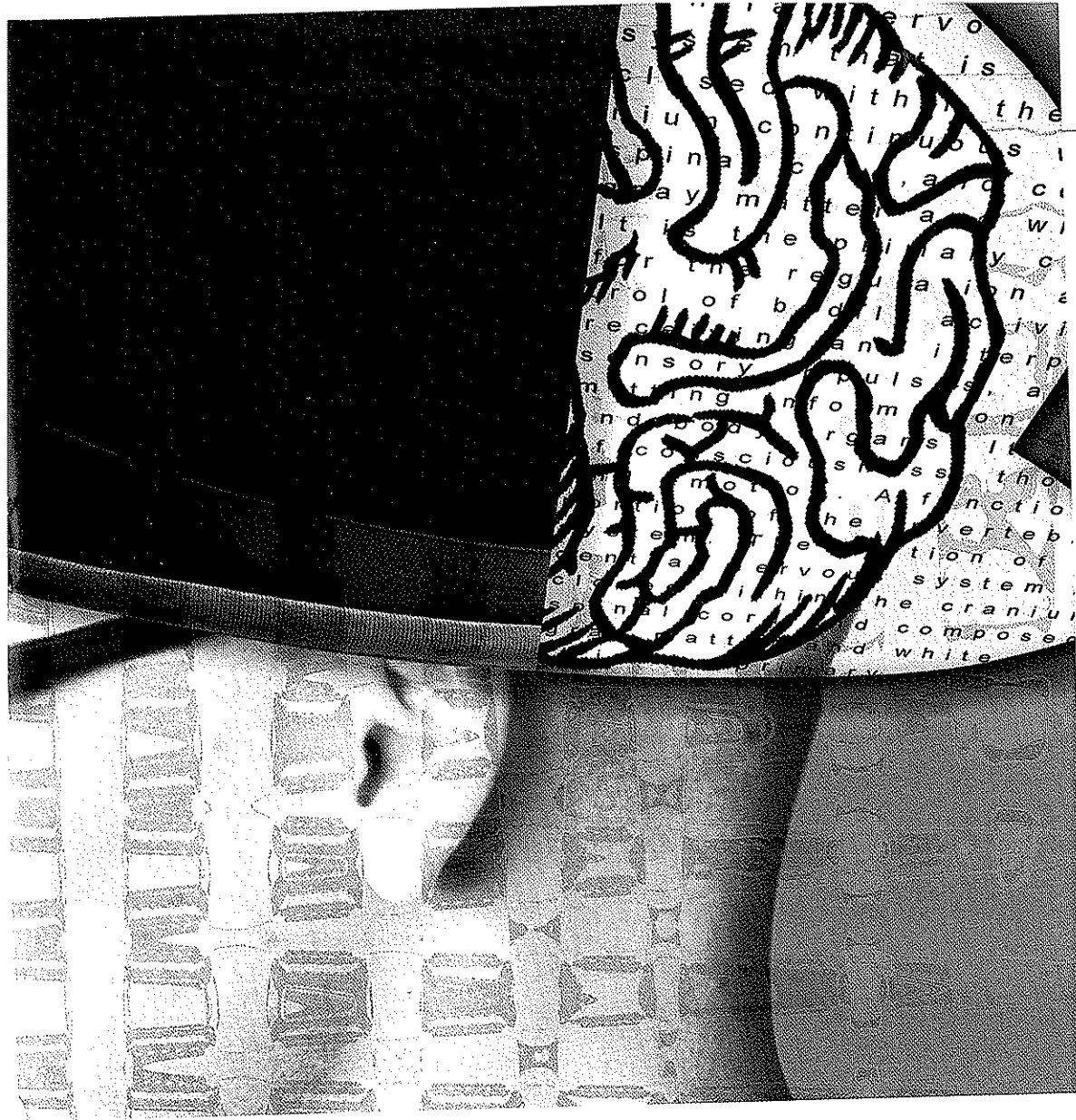
Before you panic at the thought of new laws and regulations you need to worry about, I assure you this is a good thing. This will save associations millions of dollars; help prevent damage caused by over watering and all the problems that go along with it, such as slope failure. Rather than making things more complicated for community

managers, many of the recommendations actually simplify things, such as requiring the use of Smart Controllers. These brainy irrigation clocks automatically download information from signal sites and apply exactly the right amount of water based on the previous day's weather.

Information such as soil type, plant type, sun or shade, etc. is programmed into the controller by the landscaper. This information, along with the daily evapotranspiration, or ET, is automatically downloaded, and the Smart Controller tells the sprinklers how much to irrigate and for how long.

Demand for these new water saving irrigation controllers is looking more like a tidal wave than a trend. According to the recommendations of the AB2717 Task Force, by the year 2010 all irrigation controllers sold or installed in California will be Smart Controllers. To help mitigate the costs of updating your old irrigation systems, substantial rebates for Smart Controllers are available from water agencies throughout the state. More rebates are available now than ever before, offering as much as 50% of the cost of the controller.

The use of Smart Controllers, along with a palette of "California friendly" plants, results in a water management system that saves money, reduces runoff, and is environmentally responsible. Appropriate plants include a wide variety of our native California flora as well as plants



**THE USE OF SMART CONTROLLERS, ALONG WITH A PALETTE OF "CALIFORNIA FRIENDLY" PLANTS, RESULTS IN A WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM THAT SAVES MONEY, REDUCES RUNOFF, AND IS ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE.**

from other Mediterranean regions of the world, much like our climate. However, the natural partnering of California native plants and minimal irrigation is beginning to take center stage. Since the drought of the '80s, we have experimented and learned by trial and error, the needs of drought tolerant plants and how they react to different irrigation practices. During this era, Maxicom was born, an irrigation controller with new technology that opened up a whole new world of managing irrigation from a computer and ET information. Maxicom was smart, but when the technology advanced to the new, truly Smart Controllers, Maxicom was left in the dust.

We gained valuable experience with California natives, which are gaining in popularity. We learned that planting natives in the fall or winter will save us money and a myriad of problems, such as plant loss due to over watering and the inevitable result of such, Phytophthora root rot. For years we combined natives with our favorite Mediterranean plants such as Lavender, Rosemary and Pride of Madeira. But we found that the Mediterranean

plants often required more water than the natives, and in many instances were not truly compatible with the natives, which can go weeks without irrigating. In fact, too much water easily kills natives. When a new breed of purists evolved, daring to plant all natives, we held our breath as the irrigation was reduced to only once or twice a month. It made no sense to us that natives were dormant in the summer and were begging to "Please, just us be left in peace until the fall." But wait, they're alive!

California native plants and grasses are being used more extensively in community parks, association common areas and residential yards. The communities of both Santaluz in San Diego and Shady Canyon in Irvine are the leading innovators. Both of these communities are landscaped primarily with native grasses, such as *Muhlenbergia rigens*, Deergrass and *Stipa tenuissima*, Mexican Feather Grass, to create a natural, meadow type feeling. Slopes are covered with fragrant Sage, *Ceanothus*, Toyon and other natives. Wildlife and the sounds and smells of nature abound in these areas. With increasing urbanism, people covet even a tiny slice of nature in their own yard. Native plants attract wildlife such as

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birds and butterflies, with their fruit and nectar naturally a favorite food. Attracting this type of wildlife to backyards has become more popular in the past few years and this trend continues to grow. The most recent edition of Sunset Western Garden Book devotes an entire section to "Plants that attract Butterflies and Hummingbirds." You can even register your backyard as a certified Backyard Wildlife Habitat site, by visiting the National Wildlife Federation website at [www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat](http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat).

With the increasing use of California friendly plants and the new technology of Smart Controllers, irrigation management and BMP compliance is made much easier for community managers. How can a manager or landscaper determine if site water use is too high? A simple tool was developed by water agencies to help determine how much water a landscape should use and how much water and money may be saved. Go to [www.hydropoint.com](http://www.hydropoint.com) (click on the picture of a calculator) or [www.cuwcc.org](http://www.cuwcc.org) (click on the H2ouse or water budget calculator) and insert some basic information about your site, and the water budget calculators will tell you what you need to know.

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