Consumers and Their Florida Yard: Perceptions, Practices, and Closing the Gap

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When it comes to caring for their landscapes, the gap between what homeowners “think” they’re doing and what they actually do can be wide. The results from the 2012 Your Florida Yard and You survey indicated that there are many factors for residents to consider when watering their landscape. Such factors included knowing how to operate their irrigation system controller, comprehending what made an irrigation system more efficient, understanding the different water needs of the different plants in the yard, watering the yard while working within water management district restrictions, and maintaining the yard within the required HOA guidelines. The data also support that the participants’ behavior did not match with their knowledge. For instance, the responses to what month(s) it is recommended to fertilize the lawn did not match with their responses to the question what month(s) do you fertilize the lawn. There are differences between their knowledge level and their behavior practices. The results from the survey have advanced the research project to the next level. Focus group sessions were conducted to probe more deeply into consumer landscape maintenance knowledge and practices. The participants were recruited from a list of over 10,000 names, all considered to be high water users by Orange County Utilities. The goal is to learn what the barriers are for homeowners to properly care for their yards and ultimately increase their water conservation practices. Information gathered from the focus groups will be discussed.

The gap between what homeowners’ perceptions and practices are when it comes to caring for their yards, particularly their irrigation practices, are contributing to the water shortages in Orange County, Florida. Residents of Orange County were chosen as a population of interest because Orange County is included within the Central Florida Coordination Area (CFCA), an area created by the Southwest Florida, South Florida, and St. Johns River Water Management Districts. The CFCA action plan limits additional groundwater withdrawals to no more than that needed to meet year 2013 demands, as new water permits will not go past 2013 unless supplemental water supplies are committed to meet demands after 2013 (CFCA, 2010). Therefore, Orange County Utilities (2010) must focus on water conservation as the primary source of water for new residents.

Materials and Methods

Focus group methodology is used in qualitative research and was selected for this study. Focus group discussions create a process of sharing and comparing among the participants to provide the context and depth behind their thoughts and experiences (Morgan and Krueger, 1998). They also “provide insight into complicated topics where opinions or attitudes are conditional or where the area of concern relates to multifaceted behavior or motivation” (Krueger, 1994). Focus group methodology includes the use of special methods in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. The ideal size is 5–10 people per session. Multiple groups are used to insure reliability and validity.

A total of four focus groups were conducted for this study. Participants were recruited by a research marketing firm, using a list of addresses of Orange County residents who were determined to be high water users (Romero et al., 2010). Participants were recruited by a screener using the following criteria: gender, age, education level, income level, ethnicity, and home ownership status. Participants received $70 as a recruitment incentive at the conclusion of the focus group session. A skilled, objective moderator guided the sessions through a script of questions.

Results and Discussion

The focus group sessions revealed that residents who live in a community with a homeowners association (HOA) have a great dislike or great fear of their HOA. They would like to save water but not at the cost of being cited by the HOA for not having perfect grass or at the chance that they might have to pay to re-sod the yard. One participant said “I’d rather pay an extra $15 or $20 on the water bill than have to re-sod.” There is frustration with understanding how to use the irrigation timer. Another participant said “Whenever there is a power disruption, I have to call the sprinkler guy to come out and reset it. I can’t take a chance the grass will look bad and the HOA will put a notice on my door.” They can tell you how long the sprinklers run but not how much water is delivered during each use. They think they are conserving water by only watering on the days allowed, “I only run the sprinklers on the 2 days allowed.” Great confusion exists when the water management district enforces restrictions...
while the HOA insists on perfect grass, “I’d like to save water but you’d have to prove my St. Augustinegrass would still be acceptable to my HOA.”

What can we learn from this information? Extension agents need to watch who they partner with so the message does not get attributed to the HOA. Extension will need to segment the approach to include instruction in all the different areas as well as determine what approach may increase the change in behavior and not just increase the level of knowledge gained by program participants. If water conservation is to be successful, the HOAs need to be at the table with the water management districts and support the need to save water.

Literature Cited