



Central Florida Conservation Projects Help a Greenhouse, Utility Customers Save Water

Two water conservation success stories in the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) include irrigation upgrades to a 31-year-old greenhouse operation in Orange County and Seminole County Utility's implementation of a trio of water conservation programs.

Mercer Botanicals, Inc., a greenhouse in northwest Orange County, produces huge quantities of high-end tropical foliage that is sold throughout the United States and Canada. The thriving operation covers a million square feet of production.

Wayne and Chris Mercer founded the operation in 1989 with three acres but they felt that their operation could use upgrades after nearly 30 years in business. The couple invited the Lake County Mobile Irrigation Lab to their facility to perform an irrigation audit and identify opportunities for improvement.

Using audits identifying production areas with the lowest irrigation distribution uniformity, Wayne Mercer sought assistance from the SJRWMD through its Districtwide Agricultural Cost-Share Program. In 2017 and 2020, cost-share funds enabled him to upgrade irrigation systems in more than eight acres of greenhouses.

Follow-up water audits revealed that the uniformity of the new overhead and drip irrigation systems that had originally been as low as 60 percent were now as high as 86 percent. That translates to an expected savings of more than 10,000 gallons a day on just eight acres, as well as reducing nutrient leaching from the bottoms of plant containers.

"Our Agricultural Cost-Share Program offers growers to find ways to use water as efficiently as possible by taking advantage of the best irrigation technology available," says Suzanne Archer, Technical Program Coordinator for the District's Bureau of Water Supply Planning. "The Mercers illustrate how investing in infrastructure can result in significant water savings."

The SJRWMD is accepting applications for the Agricultural Cost-Share Program through January 29, 2021. [Click here](#) to learn more.

In Seminole County, the utility offers customers three ways to reduce their water use and save money.

The first is Seminole's irrigation evaluation and rain sensor repair program, which offers customers a free evaluation of their irrigation systems.

When a customer contacts Seminole County Utilities to express concern about abnormally high-water usage, the utility's contractor, Cato Environmental, schedules a visit with the property owner, evaluates the irrigation system and conducts a water audit.

Most of the time Cato determines that the property owner has neglected to adjust the irrigation controller in a way that optimizes efficiency, says Abraham Vasconez, Seminole County Environmental Services Water Conservation Coordinator.

"The goal is to lower water consumption and optimize their irrigation system," he says. "Cato also installs irrigation rain sensors for free if they are missing or malfunctioning. Our customers appreciate that Cato teaches them how to use the controller and adjust the zones. Someone is actually showing them how to improve their irrigation practices."

The second water conservation program Seminole offers is the toilet rebate program. The utility targets toilets installed before 1994 or any toilets that use more than 2.4 gallons per flush.

"There is a process in place for us to verify that they have replaced a high-consumption toilet," Vasconez says. "After they buy and install the toilet and provide a photo, they receive a rebate."

Seminole's third strategy is to track high water use and follow up with a postcard that gently reminds the customer to follow watering restrictions.

"It's normally very effective and we usually see a decrease in water consumption after the customer receives a postcard," Vasconez says. "We use informational outreach in high-consumption neighborhoods. We'll use letters and even friendly phone calls to try and get them excited about water conservation and saving money. At the end of the day, we try to help people have a good understanding of the benefits of conserving water."

Vasconez credits the SJRWMD for providing a cost share opportunity to help Seminole County fund the implementation of the University of Florida's "H2O Save" tool, which tracks high water use based on billing data and savings from conservation programs.