

A PRAGMATIC GREYWATER RE-USE GUIDE

Using greywater from your shower or laundry can keep your garden thriving during periods of low rainfall, but you need to know how this affects your home, garden and environment. If you don't get it right, it's possible to damage your soil, plants or even put your family and pets at risk. This is because greywater has chemicals and bacteria in it, which in the wrong place can cause problems.

The info in this article will help you set up and manage your greywater, so:

- children, the elderly and pets are kept safely away from greywater (anyone or animal with a potentially weak immune system)
- food stays healthy
- the best possible quality water is used on your garden
- local creeks and environment stays healthy
- checks can be made on your system to ensure it is working well
- maximum benefit is gained from the greywater you recycle.

SETTING UP THE SYSTEM

Keep water safely out of reach of children, dogs and people and put it where it's needed by the plants - at the roots, often called sub-surface. The best irrigation systems for greywater, in fact any sort of water, are piped underground (often using slotted Ag-Drain or similar), although some people also use drip irrigation or put piping under mulch. Don't spray or hose with greywater, this just spreads chemicals and bacteria around and can burn your plants. Irrigate your ornamentals and orchards, but not your leafy green edible plants.

- Food that is eaten raw should not be watered with greywater. Cooking helps protect against harmful bacteria that may end up on the surface of the plants.
- Gardeners who cultivate native plants need to choose laundry detergents very carefully. Make sure you buy low-phosphorous detergents, as some natives are extremely sensitive to high phosphorus levels.
- All plants will need laundry detergents with low salt levels (liquid detergents generally have less salts). Too much salt is bad for you and your garden!
- Set up your irrigation system to cover as large an area as possible. The larger the area you can spread the water over the better - it dilutes any nutrients and salts in the water.
- Allow a strip of land between your irrigation system and the edge of your property. Council regulations stipulate that greywater must not run off your property to the street or your neighbours' property
- Make sure irrigation is underground, drip or under mulch to keep it safely away from people and pets, and get the best reuse value from the greywater.
- Don't store greywater more than 24 hours. Divert water directly to the garden - this means whenever you shower or wash clothes, your garden is watered. Whilst it's tempting to store the water in a drum or tub to use later, this is risky because bacteria in greywater can multiply rapidly and thus it should never be stored for more than 24 hours.
- Use the safest source of greywater possible. The safest greywater is from the rinse cycle in your washing machine. The wash cycle is the next safest, followed by bath or shower water. * Greywater from the kitchen sink or dishwasher is often contaminated by fats and solids, which can damage soils and plants - it should not be used.
- Stop using greywater if somebody in the household is sick with a stomach bug, measles or the flu as this can increase the risk of other people becoming ill.

MANAGING THE SYSTEM:

- Choose friendly detergents and cleaners. What goes into your water in the house comes out in the garden.
- The shampoos, laundry detergents and cleaners you use all contain chemicals that change the quality of your greywater.
- Choose garden-friendly detergents and cleaners - low-salt, low-phosphorous and biodegradable. Check the labels when buying these products.
- Turn your diverter off when you're cleaning, bleaching, or washing "heavily soiled" items like dirty nappies.

IS YOUR SYSTEM WORKING PROPERLY?

These simple checks can make sure your system is working properly:

1. Are your plants healthy?
2. Is greywater pooling or running off your property?
3. Is your soil changing in any way?

TIPS:

- Choose garden-friendly detergents
- Try a different or bigger sub-surface irrigation system
- Change to diverting only laundry "rinse" water or shower water to reduce the amount of water.
- Turn your diverter off in the rain. During wet weather, SWITCH OFF the diverter, so the water goes back down the sewer. When the ground is wet it can't absorb the extra water—it just runs off onto your neighbours' properties or into creeks, causing pollution.

If you are interested in a permanent greywater treatment and reuse system, you need an EPA-approved system and a permit from your local council. Contact your local council for more information.

Acknowledgements to the Alternative Technology Association as a source for this info.

For local contact about Greywater Re-Use Systems contact Kym Mogridge 02 6494 1051 or www.wormsloos.com.au.