Home Counties a region of half-hearted horticulturalists

May 8 2014, by Mike Addelman

The Home Counties is a region of half-hearted gardeners, who are most likely to hope for rain rather than water their plants, according to a study of our horticultural habits.

The team of researchers from the Universities of Manchester, Edinburgh, Southampton and Lancaster reveal five types of Home County gardeners – though a larger sixth group of people (38 per cent of the total) have nothing to water in their gardens at all.

Just under eighteen per cent of the 1,802 households surveyed in South East England were what the team called 'Hands-off gardeners', who hope for rain while seeing the garden as a place 'still being developed'. They were less likely to see it as an outdoor living area, but tended to tidy the area in springtime.

A further 18 per cent were 'Casual', who see their garden as a place for flowers and plants only, watering their outdoor areas with jugs or watering cans from the mains.

The research, say the team, has some implication on the effectiveness of hosepipe bans, even though a non-essential use ban also targets car washing, and filling of paddling and swimming pools.

A huge 81 per cent of households did not have outdoor space, watered their gardens, or even use jugs or watering cans.

Only 19% of those that had gardens actually used hosepipes or irrigation systems.

And 56% of respondents reported their gardening practice involved no watering at all, and another 25% only used jugs or watering cans.

Dr Alison Browne, based at The University of Manchester's Sustainable Consumption Institute, said: "As part of our examination into how South Easterners water their gardens, we discover there are currently five broad variants of gardener.

"And the overriding impression is that they're not as green fingered as Monty Don fans might imagine – that's assuming they have any plants at all, or feel that those they do have need to be watered.

"Our findings provide food for thought for those implementing hosepipe bans and non-essential use bans.

"Although these bans do raise awareness of the importance of using less water, we think it would be good to think about different approaches to tackling behaviour leading up to drought.

"We also urge the water industry to think differently how they might intervene to improve water efficiency."

A further 16 per cent of respondents fell into the "High-tech gardening" group, using mains water for hosepipes, sprinklers and automated irrigation systems.

Another 6 per cent were "Green fingered", who saw their garden as places for fruit and vegetables, flowers and wildlife, using a water butt or water recycled from inside their home.

And 5 per cent were "Amateur enthusiasts", tending to water with watering cans and jugs, but with a small proportion of people who used other technologies such as hosepipes and sprinklers. Like the green fingered, amateur enthusiasts, they were more likely to see their outdoor space as a place to grow their own fruit and vegetables.

Dr Browne added: "The garden is one of the few areas of watering practices over which policy makers can provide external control through non-essential use bans.

"So these results may provide useful insight in terms of identifying trigger points for action and communication in periods of drought.

"It's particularly pertinent, as the Water Bill is currently making its way through parliament."

The six variants identified in the study:

- 'Nothing to water' group: 37.6 per cent
- 'Hands off gardening', 18.3 per cent
- 'Casual gardening' 15.9 per cent
- 'High tech gardening', 15.9 per cent
- 'Green fingered gardening', 5.6 per cent
- 'Amateur enthusiasts', 4.6 per cent

The paper uses a large-scale, representative, quantitative "water practices" survey of 1802 households from the south east of England in the summer of 2011. 997 households were selected randomly from the Government Office Regions of the South, East and South East of England and a further 805 households were selected randomly from within specific case study areas of those Government Office Regions where collaborating water companies provided data.

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More information: New directions in understanding household water demand: a practices perspective. Martin Pullinger, Ben Anderson, Alison Leigh Browne and Will Medd. *Journal of Water Supply: Research and Technology—AQUA* Vol 62 No 8 pp 496–506 © IWA Publishing 2013 DOI: 10.2166/aqua.2013.048

Provided by University of Manchester

Citation: Home Counties a region of half-hearted horticulturalists (2014, May 8) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2014-05-home-counties-region-half-hearted-horticulturalists.html

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