**Water Scarcity on the Watery Planet – and What You Can Do About It**

When you're squishing through a sodden yard after days of rain, it's hard to believe that water conservation could ever be a green issue. Water scarcity only becomes an issue when the summer's been hot and dry - it's certainly not something to worry about now….right?

Wrong. While we rarely face water scarcity here, the rest of the world isn't so fortunate. Nationally, 20 states are facing shortages…and 11 nations at this moment are in drought crisis. And actually, when you take a look at the numbers, it's surprising that the situation isn't worse…

- While 70% of our planet's surface is covered in water, 97.5% of that water is salty; only 2.5% is fresh. Nearly 70% of Earth's fresh water is frozen in the polar icecaps and Greenland glacier. Most of the remainder is present as soil moisture, or in deep, inaccessible aquifers. Only 0.007% of all water on earth is fresh and available for human use.

- Of the available water that is used globally, just 8% serves the basic daily needs of 7 billion humans. Agriculture and industry together consume 92%, and much of that water is not reusable.

- A human being needs a minimum of 13.2 gallons per day for drinking, sanitation, bathing & cooking. However, many people in drought-stricken nations get only 4 to 5 gallons of water per day. Almost 1 billion men, women and children lack access to safe drinking water. Every day, nearly 6,000 people -- most of them children -- die from water-related illnesses.

- Meanwhile, in the U.S., we use an average of 100 gallons of purified water per person per day.

Bottom line? Global freshwater demands are increasing while supply dwindles due to drought, pollution, and melting polar ice caps and glaciers. It's up to us now to be aware of our water usage, and to cut back where we can.

So how do you begin? A household water audit is a good way to discover your daily water use. You can find instructions from the Maryland Department of the Environment at http://www.mde.state.md.us/assets/document/ResAudit.pdf and a worksheet at http://www.mde.state.md.us/assets/document/Residential_Audit.xls.

Once you've discovered where you're using (or losing) the most water, you can begin making changes:

- Repair leaks yourself, or call in a plumber
- Install aerators in your kitchen and bathroom sinks to reduce the flow rate to 1.5 gallons per minute (gpm) or less
- Install low-flow showerheads (2.0 gpm or less) to save water while you get a spa-quality shower
- Replace your water-guzzling toilet with a Water Sense model, or install a Toilet Tank bag or flow diverter
- Check the age and water usage of your dishwasher and washing machine. Ideally, a dishwasher should use < 7 gallons per load (gpl); a washing machine should use < 23 gpl

For tools to audit or reduce your water use, see my website at http://www.greenirene.com/philabaltimore.