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Growing Woody Plants With Limited Water Resources®

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INTRODUCTION

In Washington State the Department of Ecology sets strict limits on the amount of water that a farm can use. While the producer owns the land, the waters of the state collectively belong to the public. A Water Right Permit is the legal authorization to use a predefined quantity of water for beneficial use, including irrigation. The vast majority of Washington's available water is legally spoken for. Farmers have seen population growth, conservation demands, shrinking snow packs, and demand by industry all put a strain on this limited resource. A water right is necessary if you plan to divert or withdraw any amount of water for any use from surface waters (water located above ground) such as lakes, rivers, streams, and springs, or from ground water.

While there are many Washington farms with valid Water Right Permits, obtaining a new one is very difficult. Currently there are 5,700 new Water Right applicants on file. Due to budget contractions Department of Ecology estimates that for the 2009–2011 budget cycle they will only be able to review 370 (down from 500) applications. There are cases where applicants have waited for years to have their application reviewed, let alone approved.

Exempt Water Right Permit. Department of Ecology does have a groundwater permit exemption (RCW 90.44.050) that allows the uses of small quantities of ground water to construct wells and develop their own water supply without obtaining a valid Water Right Permit. For industrial purposes, which would include commercial nurseries, producers can use up to 5,000 gal of water per day (no acreage limit). This water can also be stored in a cistern for later use. Although exempt ground water withdrawals don't require a Water Right Permit, they are always subject to state water law.

Municipal Water. The Washington State Department of Ecology states that there are no restrictions on the use of municipal water for irrigation. Retail garden centers often connect to municipal water to irrigate their stock. Table 1 lists the cost of municipal water. Municipal water could be stored in a water cistern to supplant irrigation water derived from an Exempt well.

Table 1. Cost of purchasing 1 inch of irrigation water (27,000 gallons) for overhead irrigation on nursery stock. (Numbers are from 2009.)

Seattle: \$137/acre	Vancouver: \$63/acre	Yakima: \$47/acre
Olympia: \$96/acre	Mt. Vernon: \$60/acre	Ellensburg: \$30/acre
Bellingham: \$66/acre	Wenatchee: \$48/acre	Spokane: \$23/acre