

# Encouraging Landscape Water-Conservation Behaviors #6: Information Seeking Preferences of Florida Residents Who Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This publication is the sixth in a series focusing on encouraging water conservation among Florida residents who use irrigation in their home landscapes. This publication discusses this audience's information-seeking preferences, describes how Florida residents who use irrigation prefer to receive information about water-conservation practices related to their home landscaping, and makes recommendations for reaching this audience.

## The Importance of Needs Assessment in Extension

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) provides informal educational programs to clientele by connecting people to research-based knowledge administered through land-grant universities (Davis, 2014). Before Extension educators can appropriately deliver information, they should acquire a thorough understanding of their target audience and examine clientele needs. As Extension educators become involved in program planning, their obligation to

understand their clientele's needs should be a top priority. Planned programming allows Extension educators to deliver more purposeful Extension programming and increases participant engagement. According to Bielema & Sofranko (1983, p. 2), "a needs assessment is the starting point for all Extension programming." One way to assess needs is to ask potential learners about their interest levels for a specific educational topic (Bielema & Sofranko, 1983; Harder, 2011) and how they want information delivered, or their *information-seeking preferences*.

## Information-Seeking Preferences

Extension educators face unique challenges in determining appropriate ways to deliver information to clientele because different audiences have distinct preferences for program delivery. Extension educators should be aware of the obstacles preventing the use of specific information sources among a specific audience (Cobourn & Donaldson, 1997). The dissemination of irrigation best management practices through the audience's preferred information sources is

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more likely to contribute to the adoption of landscape water-conservation practices.

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) is an approach to understanding what attracts people to certain information channels and how they prefer to acquire information or knowledge about current interests (Stone, Singletary, & Richmond, 1999, p. 201). U&G theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) was used in an Extension context to emphasize the utilization of clientele's preferred communication channels and information sources to disseminate information. U&G theory can increase the effectiveness of Extension programming by guiding Extension educators' selection of communication channels aligned with the needs and preferences of its clientele.

## Conducting a Needs Assessment of Floridians Who Use Irrigation in Their Home Landscapes

According to Bielema and Sofranko (1983, p.2), "the most direct method of assessing needs is to ask potential learners what their interest level is for a particular educational topic." A needs assessment was conducted with the target audience of people who live in Florida and use irrigation in their home landscapes. Florida residents were considered a very important audience because they had the opportunity to act on the specific problem of water overuse and therefore should be encouraged to engage in water conservation efforts.

To collect the information for the needs assessment, a questionnaire was administered online during November and December 2014. A survey software company secured participants and disseminated the online survey link to Florida residents who use irrigation in their home landscapes ( $N = 1,063$ ). A section of the questionnaire asked respondents about their interest in information about various water topics related to home and landscape issues. Respondents were asked to specify their information-seeking preferences for learning about water issues related to landscape irrigation practices.

## Topics of Interest to Floridians Who Use Irrigation in Their Home Landscapes

Respondents indicated modest levels of interest in water topics related to the home landscape (Table 1). Respondents had the most interest in learning more about home and

garden landscaping ideas for Florida yards (39.8%,  $n = 423$ ), irrigation practices that save water, (35.7%,  $n = 380$ ), and irrigation management (30.3%,  $n = 322$ ).

**Table 1. Topics of Interest to Floridians Who Use Irrigation in their Home Landscape.**

<b>Water topics</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Home and garden landscaping ideas for Florida yards	423	39.8
Irrigation practices that save water	380	35.7
Irrigation management	322	30.3
Irrigation technologies that save water	320	30.1
Fertilizer and pesticide management	301	28.3
Fish and wildlife water needs	298	28.0
Restoring fish and aquatic habitat	226	21.3
Shoreline clean-up	220	20.7
Water policy and economics	201	18.9
Private well protection	197	18.5
Community actions concerning water issues	194	18.3
Landscape buffers	188	17.7
Septic system management	180	16.9
Watershed restoration	159	15.0
Forest management and water issues	141	13.3
Watershed management	135	12.7

## Information-Seeking Preferences of Floridians Who Use Irrigation in Their Home Landscape

Respondents indicated their preferred sources of information for learning about water topics (Figure 1). Respondents had a strong information-seeking preference for websites (65 %,  $n = 687$ ). Respondents also were interested in more traditional communication which focused on fact sheets or brochures (45%,  $n = 481$ ) and newspaper and television coverage (43%,  $n = 455$ ). Respondents showed a lower level of interest in information-seeking opportunities that would require their attendance. Only a few (16%,  $n = 168$ ) indicated interest in taking part in volunteer activities, and even less (13%,  $n = 137$ ) indicated interest in attending a seminar or conference. The fewest respondents (8 %,  $n = 8$ ) indicated interest in training for a regular volunteer position.

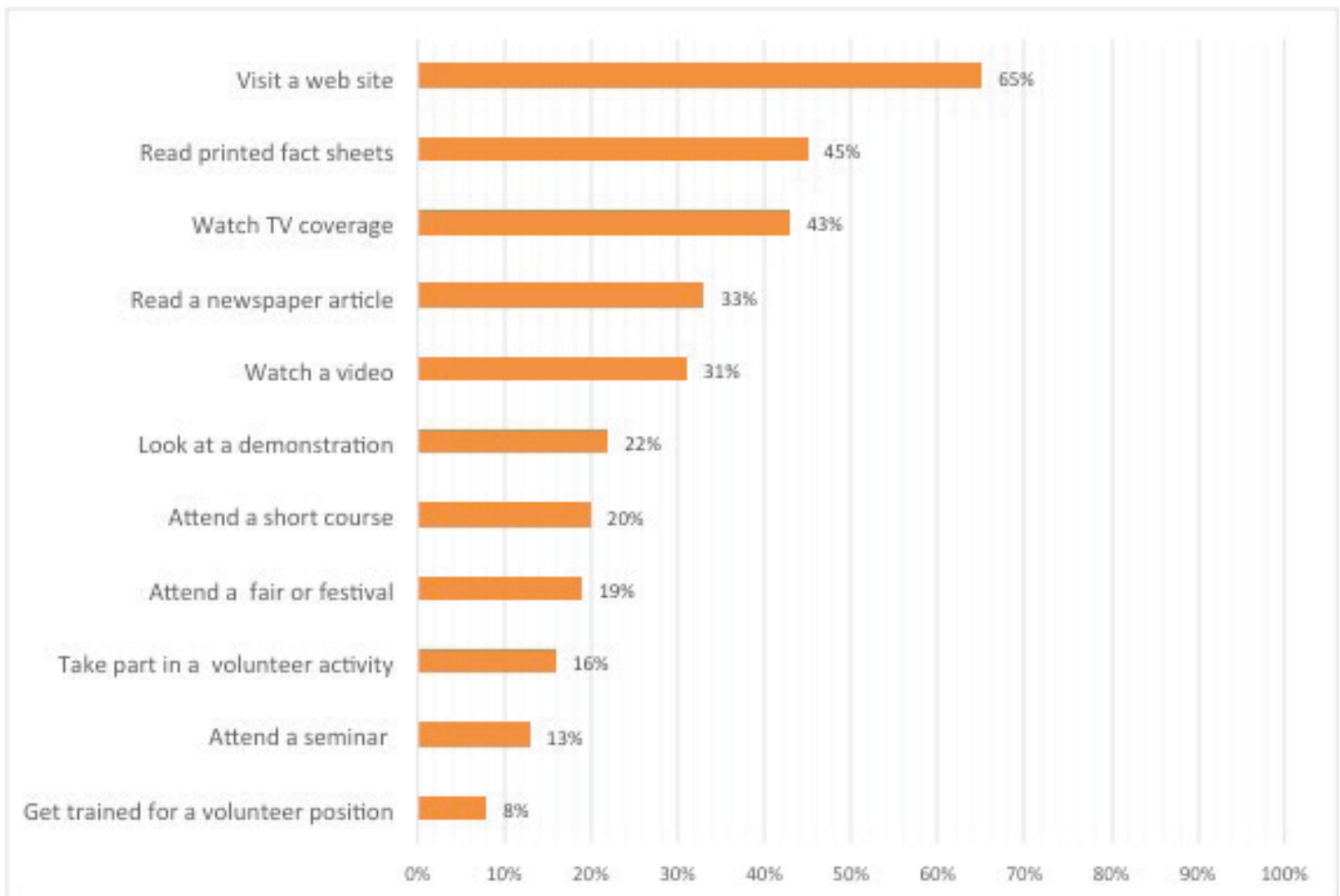


Figure 1. The relationship between Florida residents and their information seeking preferences related to home and landscape issues. This model also displays Florida residents prefer way to learn through different communication channels.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In order for Extension educators to encourage Florida residents who irrigate their home landscapes to adopt environmentally responsible irrigation practices, efforts should be made to provide information this audience is interested in and to deliver it through their preferred information channels. Floridians who irrigate want to learn about home landscaping ideas, irrigation technologies and practices that save water, and irrigation management. This target audience is most interested in seeking this information by visiting a website, and therefore more materials will need to be easily accessible online. This audience also is interested in reading printed fact sheets, and watching television coverage, but is not interested in active-engagement activities such as attending seminars and training for a volunteer position (which traditionally have been offered by Extension educators).

The findings of this needs assessment can help Extension educators reach similar audiences more effectively by

incorporating their information-seeking preferences. As technology continues to advance it is vital for Extension to include technology in addition to traditional forms of providing information (LaBelle et al., 2011). Extension must develop a strong web presence in order to reach the greatest number of people (Simeral, 2001). An increasing number of individuals prefer websites, most likely due to the comfort and accessibility of these delivery methods (Boyle, 1989; Simeral, 2001) and the ease in which they are accessed. An understanding of the information-seeking preferences of Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape can be used to increase engagement in water conservation practices through Extension programming.

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## Appendix: Encouraging Landscape Water-Conservation Behaviors Series Overview

The *Encouraging Landscape Water Conservation Behaviors* series was developed to address promoting specific behaviors, *adopting water-saving practices and technologies*, to a specific target audience, *Florida residents who use irrigation in their home landscapes*. These EDIS publications provide information to help Florida Extension professionals to

understand this target audience and guide more effective programming.

### **#1: Tailoring Programs To Florida Residents Who Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape (WC199)**

Summary: This publication describes commonalities among this target audience, and describes Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape. By understanding characteristics of this audience, Extension professionals can develop more effective and targeted programming for this audience.

### **#2: Applying Audience Segmentation to Water Conservation Activities in the Landscape—Defining Segments of the Florida Homeowner Audience and Implications for Extension Programming (WC200)**

Summary: This publication describes how segmentation can be applied to increase the effectiveness of Extension programming and defines specific segments of this audience.

### **#3: Developing Extension and Outreach Messages (WC201)**

Summary: This publication defines message framing, gain and loss framed messages, and value frames. Extension educators are encouraged to incorporate framed messages into their programming.

### **#4: Florida Homeowners’ Reactions to Messages that Encourage Landscape Water Conservation Practice Adoption (WC202)**

Summary: This publication examines attitudes and perceived behavioral control over good irrigation practices among Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape. The impact of different messages that Extension educators may use to encourage water conservation is presented.

### **#5: Segmenting the Audience Based on HOA Status (WC203)**

Summary: This publication segments Florida residents who irrigate by HOA status. Commonalities and differences among those who belong to a HOA and those who do not belong to a HOA are explored. Extension educators can use this information to understand how HOA status impacts water conservation practices.

**#6: *Information-Seeking Preferences of Florida Residents Who Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape (WC204)***

Summary: This publication examines information-seeking preferences of Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape. Extension educators can use this publication to understand how residents seek information, and the type of water conservation information that residents would like to learn about.

**#7: *Personal and Social Norms of Florida Residents Who Use Irrigation in the Home Landscape (WC205)***

Summary: This publication examines personal and social norms of Florida residents who use irrigation in the home landscape and describes how these characteristics can impact water conservation practices. Extension educators are encouraged to tailor programs that will encourage good irrigation practices and water conservation activities based on personal/social beliefs.