

Lower Your Landscape Water Costs

An attractive landscape is a valuable component of an apartment community. When asked about the cost for the landscape, management often will quote the amount of the maintenance contract. That's not the whole picture, but it is a good place to start.

First, it's important to see what the contract covers. If it does not list a specific service, chances are the contractor is not performing it. Services not listed in the contract likely will cost a property extra.

Although it's tempting to go with the lowest cost, many times the true cost can be much greater in the long run. A contractor that has a well-trained, knowledgeable staff will help you avoid unnecessary plant and tree replacement. It is important to check the certifications of these employees when selecting a contractor.

WATER COSTS

In many cases, landscape maintenance contractors are insulated from water costs associated with irrigation systems. If your only communication to him or her is to "keep it green," he or she will likely crank up the run times on the controllers. This not only results in higher water bills, but also much faster plant growth rates. Therefore it is a good idea to check into their water management practices. A quality contractor will understand the importance of good water management to both a property's budget and health of the landscape.

Communities often copy the water costs from the previous year when computing their annual budgets. This tells management how much water the property used, but not how much it should have used. The first step to compute this figure is to get the square footage of the landscaped areas. In the Phoenix metropolitan area an estimated 35,000 gallons per year is needed for every one thousand square feet of turf, while each one thousand square feet of a desert landscape may use approximately 15,000 gallons per year. These figures were calculated based on the known weather of the area, the known water requirements of the plant material, and some pretty hefty assumptions about the efficiency of an average irrigation system. The density of the desert plantings can have an effect as well. This is a raw calculation, and an efficient irrigation system controlled with good water management practices should be able to deliver even better performance.

If you conclude that your property uses more water than this test shows, it's time to find out why. Management can accomplish this with a full landscape and irrigation audit. This requires specially trained people and is labor intensive. Additionally, they are costly. They do, however, give a site a quantifiable way to look at the irrigation system's efficiency, including the necessary amount of annual water. It also serves as a tool to determine the payback periods for irrigation upgrades and retrofits.

Budgets never seem to manage themselves. In the case of landscape water costs, it means someone track usage. Sometimes communities send the bills to a corporate office and management never sees it. If that's the case, ask that bills be sent to your property. Additionally, members of the maintenance staff can read the water meters themselves and notify management of any potential problems.

Informing residents of water issues is important. Encourage them to report any problem areas such as broken or misdirected sprinkler heads. Leaks not only raise the water bill; they can cause very costly damage as well. Sealcoating the parking lot due to water damage usually is not part of the landscape budget.

Management can help adhere to its budget by making a contractor accountable for landscape water use. However, some other actions also can be effective. For example, consider hosting a poolside barbeque for the contractor and its workers. This can be a great way to reinforce your commitment to good water management practices and show your appreciation for their accomplishment. This also is a future investment as it builds a sense of pride in the completed work

Once properties begin to achieve savings, they will free up more room in their budgets for irrigation system and landscape improvement. These improvements can create even more savings in the future.

Contact your city's water conservation officer for me details on lowering your landscape water costs.

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