

FAQ's Reclaimed Water

Charlotte County Utilities (CCU) has been working on expanding reclaimed water system facilities to reach golf courses in central and west counties from any of the three water reclamation facilities (East Port, West Port, and Rotonda) that serve those areas. Water management districts and other government agencies support reclaimed water as an alternative water supply source and have been providing assistance to CCU with cooperative funding and educational grant programs in order to promote the reuse of reclaimed water. Because the production and distribution of reclaimed water is heavily regulated, municipal facilities must treat the water with a six-step removal, filtering, and disinfection process before delivering it to consumers through a reclaimed water distribution system. These facilities are continuously monitored to ensure that only high-quality reclaimed water goes into the distribution system. Reclaimed water that has been treated to this level is essentially pathogen-free, sparkling clear, and used safely by residents for irrigation and by businesses for irrigation, cooling, and other industrial purposes. Here are some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) about reclaimed water followed by answers to those questions:

How long has reclaimed water been used in the U.S.?

Highly-treated reclaimed water has been used in the U.S. for over 100 years, with its origins dating back to 1912 when San Francisco used it to irrigate Golden Gate Park. Florida began its use of reclaimed water in 1966 with the construction of the Tallahassee Reclaimed Water Farm. Usage throughout the State has continued to grow since those early years causing Florida to be the nation's leader today, reclaiming close to 700 million gallons of water per day. CCU consumers used 432,395,000 gallons of reclaimed water in 2010, saving more than 42 days' worth of potable water for consumption purposes.

Can you use reclaimed water on edible plants?

Most agricultural crop growers water "salad" their crops in a way that avoids getting reclaimed water on the plant/leaves, with root zone irrigation such as drip irrigation or soaker hoses. Edible food crops that commonly use reclaimed water throughout the world include lettuce, strawberries, cauliflower, broccoli, artichokes, celery, fennel, grapes, olives, citrus, corn, alfalfa, and soybeans. You must peel or cook food crops that come in direct contact with reclaimed water.

Is it true that reclaimed water is not for human consumption and may include bacteria, e-coli, or salmonella?

Reclaimed water is not intended for human consumption, and there have been no incidences of illness or disease from either microbial pathogens or chemicals as a result of using reclaimed water for irrigation supply. Rule 62-600.440(5) of the Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.) essentially requires that fecal coliform be reduced below detection levels. Florida's high-level disinfection criteria were designed to ensure that the reclaimed water would be virus free. It is a recycled product of water that works very well as a source of irrigation for landscape materials, fruits, vegetables, and crops. The Florida Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Protection have found that reclaimed water poses no threat to public health. Florida has been a leader in safety with no reclaimed water-related illnesses since the State's use of reclaimed water began over 45 years ago.

Do you have to wash with soap and water after skin comes in contact with reclaimed water?

Incidental contact with reclaimed water, such as being splashed or sprayed by a sprinkler, is safe for people and animals, as reclaimed water is treated with high levels of disinfectants. However, reclaimed water is not the same as potable water, and is not intended for drinking or other activities such as bathing, swimming, or laundering.

Is it true that chemicals are used to stabilize reclaimed water and then chlorine is used to clean lines, which then get disbursed onto soil and plants, etc.?

No stabilizers are used in the process to produce reclaimed water. Chlorine is used for disinfection of reclaimed water prior to distribution as irrigation for lawns, landscaping, public use areas, and edible food crops. If you are watering your lawn with a garden hose on any water system in the United States, you will have chlorine or some form of disinfectant in the water, which gets disbursed onto the soil and plants. Chlorine dissipates rapidly once exposed to air.

Is it true that reclaimed water is normally higher in salinity and may change the ground's salinity and chemical makeup?

Our chloride level (salinity) averages around 160 parts per million, which is less than the State allowance for utilization of reclaimed water. The salt content is low enough that reclaimed water will not harm sensitive plants. Additionally, reclaimed water has a low iron content that will not stain walkways and buildings.

Has reclaimed water been known to etch glass when irrigation hits glass?

Hard potable water can stain the surface of glass requiring some type of scratch removal system to remove it. This often happens after repeatedly washing glassware in the dishwasher. Reclaimed water is no harsher to glass than hard potable water. It is recommended that reclaimed water be applied through the use of root-zone irrigation, such as drip irrigation or soaker hoses, to avoid repeated spraying on windows.

What other uses are there for reclaimed water besides irrigation?

Reclaimed water is an excellent alternative water source for industrial applications such as plant wash down, power generation, and air conditioning systems for large buildings. Examples include the Home Shopping Network headquarters in St. Petersburg, the Honeywell Aerospace Engineering facility in Clearwater, the Tropicana Field in Tampa, and Tampa Electric Company's power plants.

Reclaimed water is also used extensively to help restore natural systems that have been experiencing a decline in water levels by recharging them into a better functioning wetland. This type of project has a secondary benefit by recharging the aquifer at the same time it restores the wetlands.

Lastly, reclaimed water is being used extensively throughout the country to augment surface and ground waters that are used for drinking water supplies. Tampa Bay has an innovative project that will save 26 million gallons of potable water per day by utilizing 55 million gallons of reclaimed water during the wet season as recharge to the upper Hillsborough River watershed to augment wetlands and stream flows that eventually get withdrawn downstream for potable water purposes.