

An Outdoor Classroom at the Water Conservation Garden

November 2007

Project Summary:

The Water Conservation Garden wants to turn its underutilized outdoor 350-seat amphitheater into a shaded and comfortable environment useful for education programs for pre-kindergarteners through adults.

Mission of the Water Conservation Garden:

Promoting water conservation in the southern California landscape through excellent programs and exhibits that educate and inspire the public.

Organizational Background and History:

The Helix and Otay Water Districts conceived of the idea of the Garden as a response to the drought of the early 1990s. Since San Diegans use well over half of their water on their landscapes, it made sense to demonstrate how to save water in the landscape in a beautiful public garden. The Garden opened to the public in 1999 on the campus of Cuyamaca College, the third original partner in the Garden Joint Powers Authority.

In recognition of the Garden's educational significance, three other water agencies joined the JPA: the San Diego County Water Authority, Padre Dam Water District, and the City of San Diego. The Sweetwater Authority plans to join in 2007. Water agencies contribute 79% of the Garden's \$570,000 operating budget. Twenty one percent of the operating budget and 100% of all capital and new projects must be raised from grants, memberships, donations, facility rentals, and gift shop profits.

In fiscal year 2006-2007, the Garden had 34,000 visitors. Visitation has nearly doubled in the past three years, and as the Garden increases its visibility, we expect that this number will continue its steep rise.

The Garden displays 16 gardens and exhibits dealing with different concepts in water conservation. How-to displays such as the ground covers and mulches areas give visitors many visual choices. Specialty gardens within the Garden use water-wise plants and techniques to display themes, such as landscaping to decrease danger from wildfires or to attract birds and butterflies. The Garden has completely remodeled most of these gardens and exhibits within the last three years, primarily with grant funds.

The Garden also has an extensive educational program for all ages. This includes:

- Four to six classes per month for the general public, including landscaping, gardening, and art offerings
- Training in water conservation for professional landscapers
- School tours
- Regularly scheduled adult group tours and tours by appointment

- Large educational special events, including a California- Friendly Gardening Festival in October, a Spring Plant Sale in March and a Spring Garden Festival in May. Each event attracts 2,000-6,000 people.
- Outreach programs, including a speaker's bureau and booths at events

Need for the Project:

I- Need for Water Conservation Education

The San Diego region is experiencing extreme challenges to its water resources. Ninety per cent of our water is imported, by way of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Bay Delta, as well as from the Colorado River. The former is experiencing an 8-year drought. The Sierra snow pack reached its lowest level in 30 years, and climate change predictions indicate that this pattern will continue. In addition, a Federal judge is halting as much as 30% of the water pumped through the Bay Delta in order to protect the endangered Delta smelt. Finally, the region has had two very dry years locally, and a third is predicted. Recent catastrophic wildfires showed just how dry our local vegetation is. Finally, we use 20% of our energy statewide to move water. Saving water saves energy. Since we use 50-70% of our water on the landscape in the San Diego region, it is clear that the mission of the Garden, always important, is becoming crucial to the region's economic and environmental health.

II. Need for an Outdoor Classroom at the Water Conservation Garden

The Garden currently conducts 72 classes a year, and holds 3 major festivals each year, which include multiple educational events for all ages, such as water-wise gardening lectures and water"magic shows"for children. In addition, the Garden has classes for several thousand elementary school students and several hundred pre-school students each year. In addition to these educational programs, the Garden hosts meetings related to water conservation, such as the nationally run "Under Mediterranean Skies" program, and monthly teacher training classes in xeriscaping.

All of these activities must be held in our one 30-person room, if they are to have shelter from the elements. However, it is not only educational programs which compete for the meeting room. It is the only place to conduct staff meetings, board meetings, and other administrative meetings; it is the only place from which to stage catered events, and it is the only place available for our large public event staging.

A shaded amphitheater would also help the Garden with its earned income. The amphitheater can be rented for weddings or events, such as graduations; however, the intense sunlight and uncomfortable seats preclude most of these uses. Currently, the only large events held there are in the evenings, particularly in summer, and during the morning on particularly cool days. The Garden is in a warm, sunny area, with multiple days over 100 degrees each summer. The amphitheater is situated in particularly warm microclimate that gets a great deal of afternoon sun.

Finally, the shaded amphitheater would also be used daily by our 35,000 plus visitors who enjoy sitting in the shade as they tour the Garden. Essentially, the Garden made a

major investment in the amphitheater in the 1990s. The Garden opened in 1999, but the educational potential of this 350- seat area has been held in check by the shade issue.

Description of the Project:

The Garden proposes to shade the first four rows of seats in the amphitheater (seating about 150) as well as the stage. Stage shading would allow speakers, performers, and audience members with freestanding chairs to be comfortable. The Garden has talked with two shade sail companies, and the \$120,000 in the budget for this is based upon those conversations. Current backless benches are very uncomfortable, and must be augmented with stadium seats. The Garden would also need to have a storage unit for the seating near the amphitheater. These improvements would turn this attractive area into a useful educational facility.

Project Budget:

Shade sails and supports:	\$120,000
Stadium seats (150 @30)	\$4500
Storage for seating	\$1000
Subtotal	\$125,500
10% contingency	\$12,500
Total	\$138,000

Conclusion:

Surveys done by the Otay Water District in two concurrent years show that of their customers who visit, nearly half make changes in their landscapes *as a result of their visit to the Garden*. The Garden simply needs facilities to better serve its growing visitor base, and it should be able to make a bigger impact. A comfortable outdoor classroom is key to this effort. Further reinforcement of the Garden’s effectiveness was just received in November. The Garden won an international competition for the Rain Bird Corporation’s 2007 Intelligent Use of Water Award for “innovation, leadership, ingenuity and overall commitment to improved landscape water efficiency that has raised the standard for outdoor water conservation.” The current local water situation makes it clear that we must exhibit this kind of leadership, in a region which is increasingly hard pressed to do “business as usual” in regard to its outdoor water use.