

Garden attendance grows

Visitors interested in drought-tolerant landscaping ideas

By **Anne Krueger (Contact)** Union-Tribune Staff Writer
2:00 a.m. April 9, 2009

RANCHO SAN DIEGO —
Splashes of colorful flowers at the Water Conservation Garden, from the bright pink orchid rockrose to the dark red blooms on a New Zealand tea tree, show that saving water doesn't have to result in a drab landscape.

The garden at Cuyamaca College in Rancho San Diego has been seeing a 69 percent increase in visitors since July as more San Diego County residents seek ways to make their backyards more drought-tolerant, said Executive Director Marty Eberhardt.

"San Diego is going to have to change its whole look," she said. "It's not something we need to be afraid of. It's something we can embrace."

It's the only water conservation garden in San Diego County and has received national recognition as a pioneer extolling water conservation in the Western United States.

Almost 50,000 visitors are expected at the garden this fiscal year. Eberhardt, who's headed the garden for more than four years, said the majority of visitors used to be gardeners and people with a high degree of environmental awareness.

"Now we're getting people who hadn't thought much about landscaping and weren't worried about water," she said.

Officials say Southern California's water problems will be worsening as a result of the statewide drought and a reduced supply from Northern California. Mandatory water conservation measures and higher water prices are predicted for this summer.

The garden displays plants that require little watering, offers tips on maintenance and irrigation, and suggests attractive alternatives to a yard full of water-sucking grass.

It's a living example of Xeriscaping, or landscaping using drought-resistant plants. But Eberhardt said that term isn't used — it sounds too much like "zero-scaping," just the opposite of the image the garden wants to convey. Instead, volunteers and staff refer to "water-smart" landscaping.



Visitors look at lupines as they listen to a talk about drought-tolerant plants at the Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College in Rancho San Diego. Photo by Laura Embry / Union-Tribune photos -

DETAILS

WATER CONSERVATION GARDEN

Hours: Spring, fall and winter: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, some holidays excepted; June 10-Aug. 31: Closed
Mondays: open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., except Wednesdays, when garden is open until 7 p.m.

Where: Cuyamaca College, 12122 Cuyamaca College Drive W., Rancho San Diego

Admission: Free; Suggested donation: \$4 adults, \$1 children.

Phone: (619) 660-0614, ext. 10

On the Web: thegarden.org

The Spring Garden Festival being held April 25 will be a special celebration this year in honor of the garden's 10th anniversary. The event features a plant sale, children's activities and talks by water agency officials on financial incentive programs to encourage water conservation.

Paz Herrera, a 72-year-old retired medical scientist, toured the garden recently to find some drought-resistant plants for her home in the Rancho Penas-quitos neighborhood of San Diego. She said she wants to replace the plants in her yard because she's concerned about the drought.

"I'm trying to save water for California, for the planet," Herrera said.

The garden was created a decade ago by the Otay and Helix water districts as a public demonstration of water-saving landscaping measures. Cuyamaca College donated the 5 acres for the garden.

It's now run by a joint powers authority made up of the San Diego County Water Authority, the Sweetwater Authority and the Helix and Otay water districts as well as the city of San Diego.

The county water authority contributes \$105,000 a year to the garden; Helix and Otay each contribute \$78,750 a year, and Sweetwater and San Diego each contribute \$63,000 a year. The rest of the garden's \$700,000 annual budget comes from corporate and individual memberships, grants and donations.

The Padre Dam Municipal Water District, which contributed \$63,000 a year to the garden, dropped out in June 2008 as an authority member, but Padre Dam officials say they might rejoin later.

Otay Water District General Manager Mark Watton came to the garden last week to get ideas on improving landscape irrigation at his Spring Valley home. Watton said he's already taken conservation steps on his 1-acre lot but decided to stop by after he got notice that the Helix Water District, where his home is located, plans to increase rates an average of 22 percent.

"It's pretty clear I need to do more," he said.

The garden also offers tours with a horticulturist or landscape designer and classes such as "Bye Bye Grass" and "Toss the Turf: Less Water, Less Grass, More Fun!"

Eberhardt said the garden offers practical ways to deal with the enormity of California's drought.

"People are getting hit with, 'We've got a problem, we've got a problem.'" she said. "We're a place with solutions. We can help you."

Anne Krueger: (619) 542-4575; anne.krueger@uniontrib.com

Anne Krueger: (619) 542-4575; **(Contact)**