

CALIFORNIA'S WATER: A VANISHING RESOURCE

Going green, without a lawn

Drought-tolerant gardens replacing lush yards

By **Michael Gardner** and **Mike Lee**

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

2:00 a.m. March 9, 2009



Javier Cruz dug up the front yard at the Kensington home of Jennie and Chas Rightmyer last week as part of a plan to install a drought-tolerant garden. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune) -



Chas Rightmyer is hoping that the new landscaping will cut his household's overall water use by more than 20 percent. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)



Chas Rightmyer dug up his front yard last week as part of the process of installing a drought-tolerant garden that will consume less water. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)



Raphael Iribe sifted debris from the dirt shoveled up from the front yard of the Rightmyers' home in Kensington while Javier Cruz dug up the once-grassy lawn. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)

CONSERVATION HOTLINE

Plant expert Nan Sterman offers customized tips for reducing outdoor water use, including how to get rid of your lawn, through a new hotline sponsored by the Water Conservation Garden in El Cajon.

Sterman takes calls from 8:30 a.m. to noon Tuesdays and 1 to 4:30 p.m. Thursdays.

The toll-free number for the "Water Smart Pipeline" service is (866) 962-7021.

GRASS FACTS

- Lawns cover about 40 million acres nationwide.
- On average, it takes about 45 gallons a year to water a square foot of grass in San Diego County.
- Outdoor water demand for inland homes is two or three times greater than for homes on the coast.
- Buffalo grass needs less than half the water required to maintain some other varieties, such as tall fescue.

Sources: *Environmental Management journal; San Diego County Water Authority; Public Policy Institute of California; Water Conservation Garden.*

Virtually all the bungalows in Jennie and Chas Rightmyer's Kensington neighborhood have well-tended lawns out front – part of the American dream, along with picket fences and two-car garages.

But increasingly dire warnings about statewide water shortages prompted the Rightmyers to remove their Bermuda grass. They are replacing it with a drought-tolerant garden that should be completed by month's end.

The couple hope the new landscaping will cut their overall water use by more than 20 percent.

"It just feels like the time has come," Jennie Rightmyer said.

Californians should end their love affair with lawns, said water officials, lawmakers, conservationists and landscapers. Many of these advocates have promoted native plants for years, but they now sense a greater potential for change because of the public's growing concerns about global warming, drought and ever-rising water bills.

"It's the beginning of the end of lawn at home," said Nan Sterman, who teaches a class called "Bye Bye Grass" at the Water Conservation Garden in El Cajon.

Last week, the garden's managers started a hotline for people to seek advice from Sterman about "water-smart" landscaping.

"It's not just the early adopters anymore," Sterman said. "It's (average) people who are really getting the sense that we have to do something . . . which tells me that it's becoming part of the mainstream."

Still, a large-scale shift away from lawns probably will take years and cost hundreds of millions of dollars in California.

Government agencies would need to offer more – and perhaps bigger – rebates so residents can afford to redesign their yards. Some cities and many homeowners associations would have to permit fake turf or desert-friendly plants. And it may be a while before the public is convinced that native shrubs and ground covers can look as good as grass.

There is no official statewide count of lawns, making it difficult to measure change. By one estimate, residential lawns cover about 300,000 acres in California and suck up about 1.5 million acre-feet of water per year – equal to the amount used by 3 million typical homes.

The Metropolitan Water District, the main wholesaler to Southern California, is leading an effort to trim those numbers. It is crafting a \$7 million program to pay customers to tear out their lawns starting later this year.

Residents and businesses could receive \$1 per square foot to switch to preapproved, drought-resistant landscaping. The strategy could save enough water to supply 7,900 families a year.

San Diego County water agencies offer customers 50 cents or more per square foot to install synthetic turf, but water officials expect the recession will limit how many people opt to redo their landscaping.

It costs from about \$2 per square foot to replace grass with drought-tolerant plants to more than \$10 for synthetic turf.

State Assemblyman Ted Lieu, D-Torrance, recently introduced Assembly Bill 1061, which would enable residents to replace grass with water-sipping plants regardless of their homeowners association's rules.

"Having lush green lawns is inconsistent with the water crisis we're having," Lieu said.

Metropolitan, a political heavyweight, backs Lieu's legislation because low-water landscaping could reduce homeowners associations' water use by 30 percent.

"It's not taking away all of the discretion (from associations), but it does allow the homeowner some choices," said Stephen Arakawa, a Metropolitan official.

Keith Lewinger, general manager of the Fallbrook Public Utility District and a Metropolitan director, said he understands that association boards "need to keep up appearances." But he would like residents to have more flexibility.

Lewinger was drawn to the issue by a homeowner whose association denied his request to install synthetic turf.

"It's not the AstroTurf of the 1960s," Lewinger said. "It looks like real grass."

California residents will have an additional reason to trim water use in coming months: Many agencies are preparing higher rates, stiffer penalties and new restrictions to force conservation.

Despite the efforts to replace lawns, they won't disappear soon. Conservationists said turf has its place in community parks and ballfields.

Lawns retain a special appeal for parents, said Floyd Wirthlin Jr., co-owner of the Am-Sod Inc. grass farm in Escondido.

Wirthlin recently showcased new water-saving sod varieties at a garden show in Del Mar. He feared the worst, based on his experience during the state's last major drought in the early 1990s.

"It was like we were criminals," he said.

But consumer interest in his sod ran high at the Del Mar event.

"People actually want their grass, but they . . . want to cut their water use," Wirthlin said.

For people who can't afford to replace their grass or don't want to, lawn experts suggest watering fewer times each week but more deeply each time to develop stronger roots. They also said homeowners could reduce irrigation periods by a minute each week until the grass shows signs of stress.

While fixing irrigation leaks and adjusting watering times can be simple, persuading a lawn-centric society to embrace low-water landscaping is complex.

"The whole chain has to be there," said Ellen Hanak, a water analyst for the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonprofit research group in San Francisco. "You have to have the plants available at the garden supply store. You have to have the irrigation equipment. Your landscaping professionals have to know what works in different climates and your household has to want it."

The lawn's popularity in America dates to when Europeans colonized the New World and brought their love of manicured grass. Turf thrived in the East and Midwest, where rain and snow generally provide plenty of water.

"When people moved out to California, they brought the ethic with them," said Julie Saare-Edmonds, a landscape expert for the state Department of Water Resources. "We just don't seem to be able to keep up with it anymore."

That's partly because California's population has grown, and more residents have moved inland. Yards in those areas require two or three times as much water as those in the cooler coastal zones, according to the policy institute.

Las Vegas and Phoenix are the models for giving up lawns.

Since 1999, the Southern Nevada Water Authority has encouraged residents to pull up their grass in exchange for cash – currently \$1.50 per square foot. The agency has invested \$139 million in turf conversion, saving 7.2 billion gallons of water a year.

For new residential developments, the authority bans grass in the front yard and allows it for no more than half of a backyard. New commercial developments cannot have grass.

"You can make the change today on our nickel, or you can wait and do it on your dime," said Pat Mulroy, the authority's general manager.

In Kensington, the Rightmyers plan to avoid the stereotypical Las Vegas landscape. Neighbor Tom Adam, a project manager for an architecture firm, helped the couple select vibrant low-water plants.

"It doesn't have to be a cactus," Adam said.

He is now considering the future of his own lawn.

"We just can't keep going at the same rate of water use," Adam said.