



## U-T EDITORIAL

# U-T editorial: Watching the spigot

## Reesidents respond to water conservation call with aplomb

By UNION-TRIBUNE

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The latest report card for water conservation in the region is in and it's a great one. The June report for consumers carries a gold star and the notation, "Keep it up, don't let down."

Mark Weston, general manager of Helix Water District, had been concerned about June. With a wet spring, many homeowners had turned their sprinkler systems off completely. How would they react in June with the return of hot weather to his inland district?

June usage was down 11.8 percent from the previous June and 17 percent from a three-year running average. That's in line with a spot check of other area districts. Many asked residential customers for a cut in usage of 8.5 percent. Customers responded with a 12 percent drop.

"Our customers are doing an outstanding job at ... stretching our limited resource," Weston said. "Our job in the coming year is to help them sustain this high level of conservation and make it the new norm." We agree with this goal.

And San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders announced Friday that residents of his city cut their usage by 11 percent in the 2009-2010 fiscal year.

But drops in usage do not necessarily mean much lower bills. Water wholesalers, recovering from a sustained drought and environmental restrictions on tapping the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, have had to send rates soaring to ration their short supply.

Yet conservation efforts need not leave the yard looking like a slice of Death Valley.

Consider success stories from Helix and its friendly landscaping competition.

Carol Johnson and Tina Baldwin manage the Rancho San Diego Homeowners Association, the district's second largest customer. The development, with 832 homes, had 229 acres of landscaping, much of it grass. The managers teamed up with John Crago of Treebeard Landscape and came up with a plan,

implemented in phases.

Getting 832 homeowners to buy in was easy – they sent them to the Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College to see the theme approach closest to theirs. Many grassy areas were torn out. Diseased eucalyptus trees became landscape mulch and were replaced by liquid amber, jacaranda, crepe myrtle and more. This helped the park cut water consumption by at least 40 percent.

Charles Aldrich of La Mesa won the contest by “relandscaping” with succulents. His May/June water use was down 45 percent from two years ago.

Miriam Gitchoff of La Mesa does not consider herself a plant person. But she took classes at the conservation garden, drew up a plan and turned it over to her gardener. Out are a half-dozen large palms and a huge lawn with weeds. In are a precise sprinkler system, walkways of decomposed granite, a faux streambed and huge boulders. The showstoppers are the plants, shoestring acacia, New Zealand flax, agapanthus, bluegrass, lavender and rosemary. “I have color all year long,” Gitchoff said, “and tons of butterflies and birds. If you are in the back, it so peaceful.”

Our point: Water conservation is now our way of life – but it doesn’t have to impair our quality of life.

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