A MAZILLION LOCAL JOBS TO CHOOSE FROM ON CAREERBUILDER.COM START BUILDING POST YOUR RESUME ON careerbuilder.com

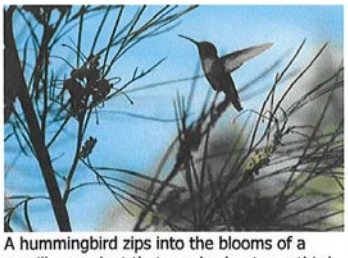
How to Make Your Yard Drought-Resistant

Horticulture experts recommend the drought-tolerant *Lavandula stoechys* or Spanish lavender as one option for homeowners looking to replace their lawns with low-water-consuming plants. Photo: Rob Davis

By ROB DAVIS Voice Staff Writer

Friday, March 14, 2008 | Long before the endangered delta smelt threatened San Diego's water supply, Dayna Hydrick dug up her lawn in University City and replaced it with sweet-smelling sage and permeable stone pavers.

That was 1998, and the decision to turn to drought-tolerant plants wasn't just about saving water. Hydrick confesses, "The happiest day of my husband's life was the day we took out the lawn and got rid of the lawnmower."



A hummingbird zips into the blooms of a grevillea, a plant that needs about one-third as much water as grass. Photo: Rob Davis

Today, as much as half of the region's drinking-water supply -- most of which is imported from the Colorado River or Northern California -- is used outside. The city of San Diego estimates that half of that water used outside is wasted on overwatering.

With the region facing uncertainty in its water supply, attention is focusing on ways to save water outdoors. While the 1987-1992 drought kicked off a region-wide effort to save water indoors, water managers hope the latest threats will help galvanize action outdoors -- even in a

This Just In

Native Plant Sale: Where to go if you're excited about tearing up your lawn.
Friday, March 14 -- 7:35 am

It Could Be Worse: For one elementary school, the budget cuts were originally bigger.
Thursday, March 13 -- 5:31 pm

More Water Cuts: Deliveries from Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta are trimmed.
Thursday, March 13 -- 3:33 pm

SPONSORED BY
Order Marathon Sod
Buy Online Freshly Cut to Order Sod Delivering to Southern California
4sod.com
Ads by Google

MOST POPULAR STORIES:

READ E-MAILED PRINT

1. In North Park, Market-Rate and 'Affordable' Condos Vie for Lowest Price
2. How the Budget Cuts Impact One Elementary School
3. The Folly of For-Sale Affordable Housing
4. How to Make Your Yard Drought-Resistant

SURVIVAL IN SAN DIEGO
House-Hunting in PB? : The Canadians are coming! And other real estate trends in Pacific and Mission beaches.
Wednesday, March 12 -- 5:18 pm

region that loves grass.

"The problem with outdoor conservation, there isn't an easy technological fix," said Marty Eberhardt, executive director of the Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College. "It also requires behavioral change, a change in appreciation of a certain kind of landscaping. There are different concepts of paradise, and there's a vision of paradise that fits our weather patterns and soil types."

Don Schultz, horticulture and facilities manager at the Water Conservation Garden, said replacing a lawn with drought-tolerant plants such as manzanita, sage or rock rose mixed with stone walkways and mulch (creating what is known as a xeriscape) can cut outdoor water consumption as much as two-thirds.

Related Links

California Native Plant Society's Garden Recommendations for San Diego

Information on Water Conservation Garden's March 15 Plant Sale (pdf)

The plush green lawns that carpet many of the region's yards are not natural in San Diego's arid climate. While some recent years have produced rainfall totaling a scant 5 inches, grass needs 48 inches of water a year to stay green, Schultz said. Keeping a drought-tolerant landscape looking lush takes about 16 inches. That's the equivalent of saving about 850,000 gallons of water a year for each acre that's converted to drought-tolerant landscaping, almost enough to supply six homes for a year.

But those water savings don't just happen -- they're not as simple as putting in a low-flow toilet that automatically saves water with each flush. Outdoor savings must be achieved.

"That's the problem," Schultz said. "It isn't that direct. It should be. But people have to water it correctly."

So how to xeriscape? Homeowners who have traded in their grass for drought-tolerant plants said the process isn't as daunting as it may seem. Landscape experts say it may not be as easy as replacing a showerhead, but once the transformation is complete, residents save time (cutting the grass) and money (watering the grass so it needs to be cut).

So if you're planning on ripping up your lawn this weekend, take a deep breath and consider the San Diego County Water Authority's recommended seven-step process to xeriscape your yard. (Some homeowners recommend a one-step process: Hire a landscaper and let someone else do the work.)

- Plan. Seriously. A xeriscaped yard isn't as simple as ripping up your grass on Saturday and plopping down some cacti on Sunday. Answer important questions first: What colors do you want? What textures? Will plants sit in sun or shade? And check whether your local water district offers a rebate. The Otay Water District, for example, offers up to $2,200 to residents in its service area who replace grass with water-wise plants.
- Test the soil. How nutritious will it be for plants? Do you need to improve the soil first? You can buy the tests at nurseries and garden stores.
- Choose wisely. Figure out exactly what plants you want out there. Hydrick warns people to "stay away from vines. They're extremely labor intensive. Even as gorgeous as they can be."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
The Ball is in Your Court: It's now up to California citizens to insist that their legislators prepare a more realistic budget for the next fiscal year than the governor has proposed.
Friday, March 14 -- 10:43 am

CAFÉ SAN DIEGO
A Message to Café Readers: A great season is approaching.
Thursday, March 13 -- 5:22 am

COMMENTARY: SLOP
Can We Afford Affordable? : We're embarking on a great discussion.
Thursday, March 13 -- 5:28 pm

COMMENTARY: RICH TOSCANO
Fantasy in the Real Estate Business : The desperate and discredited gambit of blaming the media for the housing downturn is apparently still with us.
Thursday, March 13 -- 9:45 am

Sponsored by
Voice Daily News Alert
Get the headlines. Delivered daily to your digital doorstep.

Schultz recommended a host of his favorite plants: Grevillea. "They're all beautiful," he said, stay green all year and use one-third as much water as a lawn. Toyon, a shrub that looks like holly, can go several months without water. Strawberry trees, which bear a fruit that is "not tasty, but edible," Schultz said, can grow to be about 20 feet. Schultz also recommends sages and rosemary.

And keep this in mind. Xeriscaping isn't pronounced "zero-scaping." Schultz said that is a common misperception that residents must choose between having a lush green lawn or nothing but a bunch of rocks and cactus. Not so, he said.

Melissa Bilger, who went the drought tolerant route at her new Escondido home, said she was surprised at the variety of plants she could choose from.

"Often you think you're stuck with succulents and cactus," she said. "But you're really not. You don't have to give up color."

- Think turf. You've seen the cheesy LaDainian Tomlinson commercials touting the benefits of synthetic Easy Turf. Consider whether you want to follow his advice. Some local water districts also offer rebates for turf installation.
- Irrigate those sweet new plants efficiently. Schultz recommends grouping plants together by the amount of water they need. Sheri Harris, a Clairemont resident who replaced grass with flax and aloe cactus, said her water consumption dropped about 400 gallons a day.
- Dump some mulch. This can help retain moisture and cut down on weeds.
- Maintain (and enjoy) that beaut. Don't water it every day. (That would kind of defeat the purpose.) Only water at night and wait until the soil is dry to water. Even in summer, plants only need to be watered once or twice a week, Schultz said.

And pat yourself on the back for saving water. Larry Edwards, a Linda Vista resident who spent about $1,000 and a year planting drought-tolerant landscaping in his front and side yard, said he'd like to see more homeowners do the same thing.

"There isn't that community view that we have one well and if that well goes dry we all suffer," Edwards said. "The water authority hasn't come up with a compelling message, and I don't know if anyone can until there's a crisis. It is encouraging to see that more people are doing this, but I'm sure more should."

Please contact Rob Davis directly with your thoughts, ideas, personal stories or tips. Or send a letter to the editor.