

Building Nevada



WATER-SMART LANDSCAPING MAKES CENTS

DEALING WITH NEVADA'S DROUGHT

Landscape experts in both Northern and Southern Nevada give advice on how to conserve one of the state's most precious resources.

Shown at The Gardens of the Southern Nevada Water Authority are: John Jones, Poggemeyer Design Group, Inc.;

Jim Altwegg, The Groundskeeper; and Stephen Pingree, Amargosa Pine Growers

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Water-Smart Landscaping Makes Cents

Dealing with Nevada's Drought

Informing Northern Nevadans about water-smart landscaping are (left to right): Tom Stille of Interpretive Gardens, Dale Doerr of CFA and Andy Gebhardt of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority.



by Doresa Banning

Nevada's streetscapes and yards are changing. Once embellished with greenbelts, trees and shrubs, they now boast different types of ground cover, multiple plant groupings, varying elevations and even streams. The concept behind the new look is water conservation.

Increasing numbers of residential and commercial property owners are choosing water-smart, or water-efficient, landscaping over traditional landscaping. "Water conservation is definitely becoming more and more popular," said Tom Stille, president of Interpretive Gardens, a Reno firm that develops sustainable landscapes. "And as the price of water increases, people will be more concerned, especially when we start having to have water meters." In Northern Nevada, approximately 25 percent of users presently pay a flat fee for water, but the Truckee Meadows Water Authority (TMWA) is gradually phasing in water meters and will eventually require all users to pay according to the volume of water consumed.

According to the experts, water-efficient landscaping incorporates these seven principles:

- Limit use of turf to places where it's functional, such as in picnic areas or children's play yards.
- Prepare the soil. Soil should be loose so water can penetrate it and roots have sufficient air.
- Use water-efficient and drought-tolerant plants.
- Practice hydrozoning, grouping plants according to their water needs.
- Apply water efficiently, using drip or low-volume irrigation.
- Use mulch to cool the soil surface and

hinder evaporation.

- Maintain the landscaping; prune, fertilize, control pests and weeds.

EFFICIENT AND BEAUTIFUL, TOO

One reason people are converting to water-efficient landscaping is a greater awareness that it doesn't have to be barren and boring. Rather, it can showcase stunning color, assorted flowering effects and various textures. "People are discovering their landscape is more diverse, more vibrant, more a part of their lifestyle if they include different kinds of plants, different styles and different approaches other than what I call a 'blandscape' – grass and a tree," said Doug Bennett, conservation manager for the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA).

John Jones, manager of the Landscape Architecture Department at Poggemeyer Design Group, Inc. in Las Vegas, agreed. "The beauty of good desert design matches other areas of the country. It is a different aesthetic, but no less attractive. Good desert design reinforces the unique qualities of the Southwest – its boldness, as well as its subtle details – and creates a special 'sense of place,'" noted Jones.

Leaves and blooms provide a landscape with color, said Jack Zunino, president of J.W. Zunino & Associates, a landscape architecture and land-planning company in Las Vegas. Incorporating plants with different blooming seasons provides a garden with year-round color. Texture is created by mixing colors and shapes, Zunino said. In areas where people are sitting or walking, Zunino likes to follow what he calls a mini-oasis concept. It entails clustering some less water-efficient plants

(such as ornamental ligustrums or euonymus) near the house or building, and using water-efficient groupings further away.

When designing plantings for drought conditions, landscape architects take into consideration not only the general climate of the area, but also "microclimates" – areas that can support specific types of plants with little maintenance, according to Jones. A shady area under a tree or a sheltered nook between large rocks can be its own microclimate. "It comes down to placing the right plant in the right place," said Jones. "This leads to ease of maintenance and lower overall costs."

Non-native plants that do well in Nevada can add interest to water-smart landscaping. Agaves, euphorbias and yuccas from Arizona and New Mexico are finding their way into Northern Nevada gardens, Stille said. Leucophylla, cassias and birds of paradise are being used in Southern Nevada, according to Zunino. Eldarica pines were recently introduced to Nevada, as Amargosa Pine Growers began growing them in the Amargosa Valley for the wholesale Southern Nevada market. These tall, green pine trees are native to Afghanistan but thrive in the state's desert climate. "They provide shade, color and privacy, which is quite a contrast to the rocks, mesquite trees and low shrubbery-type of desert-hardy landscaping," said Stephen Pingree, founder and manager of Farm Road LLC, which owns Amargosa Pine Growers.

WHY THE HEIGHTENED POPULARITY?

The primary advantage of water-smart landscaping is water conservation and, subsequently monetary savings, which

can be significant in light of increasing water costs. In Southern Nevada, turf requires lots of water – 79 gallons of water per square foot per year, according to the Xeriscape Conversion Study conducted by SNWA between 1995 and 2000. In contrast, water-smart landscaping requires 17 to 25 gallons of water per square foot per year. Converting a turf-based landscape to a water-smart landscape reduces water use by 75 percent, the study showed. “Even people who like a lush look can achieve it with half the cost,” said Bennett.

About 30 percent less maintenance is needed with water-efficient landscaping than with traditional landscaping, Bennett said. This translates into greater savings potential. “Another value of the landscape is that you’re sharing it,” he added. Property owners with water-smart landscaping enjoy watching wildlife in their yards, which double as animal habitats. Their landscaping attracts birds, butterflies, squirrels, lizards, hummingbirds and more.

Southern Nevadans have an additional monetary incentive to convert grass to water-smart landscaping. With its voluntary rebate program, SNWA pays property owners \$1 per square foot of grass replaced, up to 50,000 square feet, and then 50 cents per square foot for the next 500,000 square feet. The maximum rebate per property is \$300,000, and many homeowners find the rebate sufficient to fund a large part of the relandscaping work.

Those interested in the program can enroll online. SNWA representatives approve the water-smart design, property owners effect the conversion within six months, and SNWA inspects the final result to ensure the necessary conditions have been met.

SNWA began the program in 1999 following completion of its Xeriscape Conversion Study. Last year, property owners converted more than 34 million square feet of grass, Bennett said. More than \$28.6 million was rebated to customers. “It’s been enormously successful,” Bennett added. “We have 10,000 people per year who apply to the program. Our estimated savings right now from this program is just under 3 billion gallons of water per year.”

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what fund the water-smart landscapes program, Bennett said. Connection fees made \$32 million available this year for the water-smart landscapes program.

Jim Altwegg, construction manager for The Groundskeeper, a Las Vegas firm that specializes in turf conversions, said he works with property owners, both commercial and residential, to show them the best ways to replace grass with less thirsty landscape options. "When we help a commercial property owner take advantage of the Water Authority's rebate program, we often get resistance from tenants at the office park, shopping center or apartment building," he said. "They're afraid the new landscaping will be rocks and cactus, and will look ugly and boring. Once the work is completed, tenants are happy when they see how colorful it is. As long as you use a drip system, you can even include tropical plants and still save water." The Groundskeeper also works with homeowners' associations to convert landscaping in common areas of master-planned communities from grass to a wide range of water-smart plants.

In the Truckee Meadows, property owners use three gallons of water per square-foot, per season, said Andy Gebhardt, supervisor of customer services and conservation for TMWA. Data are not available on how much water is used or saved with water-smart landscaping in the north. TMWA doesn't have a rebate program, as it has no way to fund it, Gebhardt said. Conserved water is stored or supplements what's needed upstream during droughts. The agency does, however, encourage water conservation. This year it plans to launch an annual awards program that showcases water-efficient landscape designs and honors their creators. "The purpose is to show that water-smart landscaping can be attractive, can serve the owner's needs and still serve the community's needs by conserving a vital resource," Gebhardt said.

WHAT ARE THE DRAWBACKS?

With water-smart landscaping, more time must be spent initially on soil preparation and design than with traditional landscaping. "It's not as easy as laying down sod," Gebhardt said. "The investment

on the front end can add cost to the project, but ultimately will add value." Whereas a lawn provides instant gratification, water-efficient landscaping may not look as pretty as desired in the first year or so.

Implementing a water-efficient design may necessitate intense physical labor, particularly when jackhammers are required to remove concrete, caliche or large rocks. However, those who are capable can do it themselves, Bennett said. "Anybody can really do this if they go out and seek the information first and are willing to make that investment in time and effort," he said. To assist people with their landscaping, SNWA has a plant list and five design templates on its Web site, snwa.com. TMWA offers a landscaping guide on its Web site, tmh20.com, in interactive and paper forms.

EMERGING TRENDS

"Designing for our cyclical drought conditions can have positive impacts on conserving resources in general, including materials, chemicals, energy and labor," Jones pointed out. "Life-cycle costs of water-conserving landscape design can be much lower than resource-intensive solutions."

How we irrigate land continues to evolve. For example, evaporative control (EC) systems are popular now, said Dale Doerr, director of landscape architecture and planning for CFA Inc., a Reno company providing planning, civil engineering, landscape architecture, land surveying and construction. EC systems are installed below the surface of a lawn or garden. Runoff water from rain gutters and drains is funneled to an underground storage reservoir and landscaping is watered from underneath.

Another growing trend is reusing or recycling water. Increasingly, communities are pursuing irrigation with reclaimed water and treated wastewater. A second method is capturing rainwater. Zunino harvests water by grading a multi-terraced dry riverbed and lining it with grasses and trees that will suck up the water collected there. Some homeowners are recycling grey (non-potable) water. They're applying water that's been used for dishwashers, showers, sinks and laundry rooms to their landscaping, Stille said.

It's not as important how property owners conserve water — just that they do. As Doerr pointed out, "Water is a limited commodity in our area and a precious resource." ❁

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