

The Daily Transcript

The Business of Water: A conversation with Marty Eberhardt

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Monday, April 24, 2006

Part of the San Diego County Water Authority's Capital Improvement Program, designed to anticipate the county's future demand for water, calls for water saved through conservation to increase from 5 percent in 2004 to nearly 10 percent in 2020.

One of the ways the SDCWA plans on meeting this goal is through an increase in landscape water conservation. Currently, it is estimated that 50 percent to 70 percent of household water use is utilized for landscaping purposes.

In 1999, the Water Conservation Garden, an experiment in interactive landscape education, opened its doors to the public to promote water conservation in residential landscaping. *The Daily Transcript* spoke with Director Marty Eberhardt to find out more about the garden, located near Cuyamaca College in El Cajon, and what it's doing to promote water conservation.

Why was the garden established?

The garden was established in the early 1990s as a result of the drought that was occurring then. And Otay Water District and Helix Water District thought there should be a model demonstration garden that would show people what they could do to save water in the landscape. That becomes even more important now because we've kind of done what we can in terms of indoor water savings as a community. We've got low-flow toilets, we've got low-flow showerheads, we've got washing machines that save water, but 50 percent to 70 percent of the household water budget is spent in landscape. And this garden can show you how to get that down. It's really not that hard to save water in the landscape and San Diego could make quite a bit of progress in that area.

How do to demonstrate this at the garden?

Well, there are a lot of pretty simple ways to save water. They range from picking the right plant materials -- plant materials that are particularly geared to our climate region. Of course, we live in a Mediterranean climate, so if you pick plant materials from this climate as well as other Mediterranean climates, then you don't have to be pouring on the water in the summer. And some plant materials don't even require that much supplemental irrigation at all. We are not a total native plant garden; we believe that people need to have a choice and we also believe that it's OK to have some high-water use plant material and even some turf. It's just that there are a lot of choices out there that don't use that much water.

So that's one thing. But even if you have low water-use plant material, if you don't irrigate it properly then it doesn't even matter. Like if you don't fine-tune your irrigation system to give water when (the landscape) needs it and don't give (water) when it doesn't need it.

And there are some wonderful things out there now like weather-based irrigation controllers that actually read the weather and water based upon that. And then there are the simple things like: turn it off when it's raining.

There are other tips that we show here, like mulch holds in moisture; it's a good idea to use mulch. Again, what I was saying about turf, turf is fine. But how much do you want? Do you just want it for your dog to have a little play area? Do you want just a little bit so your kids can roll around in the grass? But do you really need your whole front yard to be turf? Why do you think you need that?

So those are the kinds of things we encourage people to think about. And the other thing we encourage people to think about is it's fun. As you walk around the garden, it's beautiful. And I always say, conservation doesn't have to be deprivation.

People have this idea in their minds that xeriscape — which means dry landscaping — they think of "zero"-scape, like the number, which has been a problem with that word. So then they have an image in their mind of a gravel moonscape, which is exactly what we're trying to not promote.

We want people to see that a low water-use landscape can be absolutely beautiful and very fulfilling and that's a lot of what this garden is about, to get people to see that. Because a lot of people come through the door and say, "This is wonderful. Oh, I could do this. I could make a little change here."

For people who haven't visited the garden, can you tell us a little bit about what the garden is, physically?

We have almost five acres of exhibits that show various ways of low-water use landscaping. There are themed gardens, there's a vegetable garden, there's a native plant area, there's even an amphitheater that's planted with low water-use plants between the seats. There's a turf demonstration area that shows different turfs and how much water they use and you can go through the garden, it's kind of a tutorial garden. There's a lot of signage that can give you a college course in low water-use landscaping. You can take as little or as much information as you want. The garden is also a backdrop for our classes. We have a lot of classes, six or seven classes a month for the general public on topics that range from design your own landscape to Peter Rabbit hopping down the bunny trail for parents and their kids.

One of the things we're going to try to do here is -- actually we are doing -- is coming up with a little more interpretive signage, a little more interactive signage to encourage families because it can be a fun place to come with the whole family.

Who funds the operation?

We're a joint powers authority. The land is owned by Grossmont Cuyamaca College District. And there are five water districts in the joint powers authority: San Diego County Water Authority is the lead agency, Otay Water District, Helix Water District, Padre Dam Water District, City of San Diego Water District. But they don't provide all of our operating funds. They only provide about 80 percent. We have to raise the other 20 percent through gift shop sales, utilities rentals, membership and donations. And then all of our ground improvements we have to raise. For example, we just put in an entirely new cactus garden this year, and that was all from private donors.