

CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

By **Alex Breitler**
February 03, 2014
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STOCKTON - Yes, this drought is a disaster.

But it's also an opportunity to change our wasteful ways,

It's an opportunity to develop new and better habits.

And for Georgia Eaves, a Realtor, it's an opportunity to tear out that old crabgrass (it was always brown anyway) and install a new pea gravel front yard with a "creek" made of stones, orange-flowering aloe vera plants and a drip irrigation system that provides a thrifty 1 gallon an hour.

"This has been on my mind for a long time," Eaves said Friday, standing in front of the midtown home she has owned for seven years. "I thought, 'You know what? This is the perfect time to do it.' "

Whether you're willing to tear out that sacrosanct turf and rebuild your front yard or whether you're more comfortable sticking with cheap and easy tricks like pouring cold bath water on houseplants, everyone can play a part in helping California through its worst drought on record.

Inside the home

Stocktonians use about 180 gallons of water per day. Imagine one of those big lobster tanks you see in restaurants - that's your daily water consumption.

Usually, more than half of the water people use is for outdoor landscaping. But first, let's take a look inside.

» Get a bucket. Collect the cold water that falls while you wait for your shower or bath to warm up. Use that water to fill pet bowls or water houseplants. (Oh, and while you're at it, how about cutting those 10-minute showers in half? That'll save 25 gallons right there.)

» Installing a high-efficiency toilet could save you 19 gallons a day, depending on the model you're replacing (and how often you flush, but we won't go there). Speaking of toilets, the ol' brick-in-the-toilet trick is so 1977. Eroding bricks can actually damage your plumbing, so fill a small container with water and try that instead.

» Speaking of upgrades, high-efficiency clothes washers use up to 50 percent less water than older brands, and \$150 rebates are available for California Water Service Co. customers. You can also get faucet aerators and low-flow shower heads for free from Cal Water and from the city's Municipal Utilities Department.

» Dirty dishes? Don't do them by hand. Newer-model dishwashers are actually more efficient, the state Department of Water Resources says. They're also pretty thorough at removing food, so you don't have to rinse your plates so much.

» Fix those leaks. It's actually a violation of city code to ignore leaks in your house. Put some food coloring in your toilet tank; if it seeps into the bowl, you've got a leak.

» Here's one people don't think of often: If you don't want to waste water, then don't waste food. Not included in your 180 gallons a day is the 700 gallons it took to make that cheeseburger. Eighty percent of the water used by humans in California goes to agriculture. If you don't want it to be wasted, finish your dinner.

There are countless ways to help, some of which probably haven't been dreamed up yet.

"People are creative, and we'd like to hear what they're coming up with that we haven't thought of," said Bob Granberg of Municipal Utilities.

Stepping outdoors

It's all about your lawn.

"Just look at what your irrigation system is doing," Stockton landscape architect Jeff Gamboni said. "A lot of people don't adjust clocks. They have it set at night, and so they don't even realize there's water just pouring down the street. I see it all the time."

Just because it's been dry like June doesn't mean you should be watering like it's June.

Grass, after all, is like a freeloading cousin. It will take all the water you've got, and it still wants more.

Right now, San Joaquin Delta College horticulture instructor Mike Toscano suggests running the water a couple of times, then turning it off and then running it again a few weeks down the road. This will ensure the soil is holding at least some moisture if the drought gets even worse.

Be conservative. It's winter, and your grass simply doesn't need much water.

Later this spring, when the need increases, take a screwdriver and see if you can easily push it 6 inches into the soil. That's a good way to determine if there's enough moisture in the ground.

Add mulch in your flower beds, which will protect the soil from the heat and keep it moist.

And yes, check your alignment to make sure your sprinklers aren't watering the sidewalk.

"Think of your water as the gas pump and you're putting gas in your car," Toscano said. "If we had little meters on our faucets that went 'Click, click, click,' we would be using our water very differently."

The big commitment

If you're willing to kick the grass habit completely, you could call a landscape architect, or you could plan a xeriscaping project on your own.

It's not actually that hard, and now is the time to do it, said Karrie Reid, a horticulture adviser with the University of California Cooperative Extension in Stockton.

Why? Ironically, drought-resistant native plants need a fair amount of water for the first year or so to become established. Right now, that water is available, but it might not be later if we plunge into a multiyear drought.

You'll need to redo your irrigation system, of course, and buying the plants might be costly. But you can buy as many or as few plants as you want, and you could upgrade your yard in phases to help control the cost.

"It's not as expensive as you think," Reid said. "And once the plants are established, it's not like you're having to buy again every year, because they're perennial plants. It's an investment."

Indeed, Eaves expects that the water bill at her home will be substantially reduced once hot weather returns.

John Nydam, a fellow Realtor who previously worked as a landscape contractor, helped spread mulch Friday across an island among the rocks, dotted with plants which in years to come will be shaded by a newly planted California pepper tree.

"You see a lot of this in desert communities," Eaves said. "Hopefully it's catching on here, too."

The question is, what water-saving tactics will catch on at your home?

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Have a suggestion?

How do you save water at home? What's your favorite trick? We want to hear from you. Email reporter Alex Breitler at abreitler@recordnet.com.

Learn more

- City of Stockton customers can download a home water conservation survey and receive a free kit. Visit bit.ly/1jV94lc.
- Cal Water offers kits and rebates. Visit calwater.com and click on "Conservation." If you live outside Stockton, check with your water provider for similar programs.
- The San Joaquin Master Gardeners can help you with landscaping questions: sjmastergardeners.ucanr.edu or call (209) 953-6112.
- Recently, 23 local landscapers were certified as "green gardeners" by the University of California Cooperative Extension in Stockton. They have special training in water conservation. Here's a list: bit.ly/1a9zBlf.
- Many websites offer general water conservation tips. Start with the state Department of Water Resources at saveourh20.org.