

Inland lawns are chief drain on water supply

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Video: [Landscaping with plants that use less water](#)

Jennifer Francis was stunned to get a letter from her homeowners association warning she'd be fined \$50 if she didn't water a patch of browning grass by her driveway.

"We've had no rain. How ridiculous is it that they want us to waste water," said the nurse who lives in the Jurupa area west of Riverside. Recent rains did little to abate the dry conditions, dousing Riverside with just 0.19 inches.

As the state faces a water crisis, pleas for conservation are no longer focusing on low-flush toilets and low-flow showers, but on the outdoors where 60 percent to 80 percent of a home's total water goes to keeping landscaping green. Long Beach officials, for example, limited lawn watering to three days a week in the wake of a judge's ruling that could reduce by one-third the amount of Northern California water imported to Southern California, including the Inland area.

But the effort to get residents to voluntarily ease off the hose like Francis did may not be an easy task.

A recent statewide survey found that just more than half of the residents polled had no idea how much water they sprinkle on their lawn and gardens. Of those who ventured a guess, 68 percent thought they use less than 50 gallons a day, when the statewide average is 185 gallons, according to the survey conducted by the Water Resources Institute and the Institute of Applied Research and Policy Analysis, both at Cal State San Bernardino.

The survey, the first statewide poll of its kind looking at attitudes toward water and lawns, was co-sponsored by the California Urban Water Conservation Council. The nonprofit council made up of utilities and environmental groups was charged in 2004 with creating a statewide task force to explore ways to reduce water use on landscapes.

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Carrie Rosema / The Press-Enterprise

Jennifer Francis received a letter from the homeowners association warning she faced a fine if she didn't water a section of browning grass by her driveway. She is looking into low-water-use plants to put in its place. At right is her son, Ben, 5.

Chris Brown, the council's executive director, said the timing of the survey couldn't be better.

Southern California water sources are shrinking: The Colorado River is gripped by an eight-year drought; the water content of the snowpack in the Sierra Nevada this year was 29 percent of normal; and local rainfall was at best one-third of normal. In addition, federal scientists are predicting a La Niña weather pattern that would bring another dry winter to Southern California.

Armed with the survey's findings, the conservation council's members will craft messages to raise awareness of how much water people use outdoors -- a concept that may take some time to get, Brown said.

But such messages, he said, could play off the competitive edge neighbors sometimes have with each other.

"When you're keeping up with the Joneses in California," Brown said, "you're looking at a nice landscape that fits the California landscape and not something imported from a different part of the country that doesn't fit our resource constraints."

The Pretty Factor

Those surveyed said they care most about the appearance of their lawns and gardens, followed by ease of care and a place for children and pets to play. Because of that, Brown said the message has to get out that drought-resistant plants, shrubs and ground cover use less water, can look great and are easier to care for than mowing a lawn each week.

Those messages might end up being carried by the youngest of Californians. As some children persuaded their parents to recycle, the same may go with water conservation and drought-adapted plants, said Susan Lien Longville, director of the Water Resources Institute.

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People in the survey said they would listen most to gardeners, a university expert and their children when it comes to messages of water conservation, and were less likely to pay attention to an actor, politician or religious leader.

To that end, Longville said, Chino-based Inland Empire Utilities Agency and the water institute will launch a pilot project next spring in which schoolchildren will knock on doors and hand out brochures selling drought-resistant plants instead of candies or gift-wrapping as fundraisers.

Rebate and Demonstrate

Longville said the survey found that people would also respond to rebates for weather-sensitive sprinklers that use less water or a so-called "cash for grass" program like the one that has been in place in the Las Vegas area the past few years.

In fact, 81 percent of respondents said a program that offered cash for reducing lawn size and replacing it with more water-efficient plants would work or might work.

Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley has said that could be the next step. The county passed an ordinance last year requiring new homes to have water-efficient landscapes by 2010.

Although 35 percent of those who said they would not buy water-efficient plants cited appearance as the most important reason for their reluctance, 87 percent said they would be or might be motivated to change their landscape if they saw the plants laid out in a demonstration garden.

"A lot of people think drought-tolerant plants are gray, scrubby dry things and cactus, and they certainly don't have to be. There's thousands of plants, and if you plant it right, you can have color all year long," said Pam Pavela, a conservation specialist for Western Municipal Water District.

The district, which mostly imports Northern California water to a large area of western Riverside County from Corona to Temecula, has maintained a one-acre demonstration garden with 250 different plant species, including rosemary, sage and lavender, at its Riverside headquarters for several years.

The district, like others in the region, also holds classes for people within the service area to learn how to choose the right plants and irrigate them properly, Pavela said.

Managed Property

About 90 percent of survey respondents, who represented homeowners associations, property managers and maintenance contractors, said that grass was either very important or somewhat important to their landscape.

Francis received the warning because in a homeowners association, "part of the responsibility of the homeowner is to maintain the aesthetics of their unit, which includes their lawn and lawn care," said Benjamin Baldassarre, office manager of Guardian Preferred Properties in Riverside, which manages the Sycamore Hills Homeowners Association.

Despite the drought, he said, residents should still use enough water to keep the lawn alive.

One unnamed property manager, who responded to the survey, said competition dictates water usage, especially in housing developments.

"The value of the homes in the community compared to the competition will always outweigh the social consciousness of using plants and irrigation controllers that save water," the property manager said.

Those who manage large tracts of public property such as parks and schools report that the low cost of water actually discourages conservation. Of property managers surveyed, 77 percent said they would or might respond to low-maintenance messages or environmental messages that stress that excessive runoff pollutes rivers, streams and oceans.

Overall, Longville said, people appear to want to do the right thing when it comes to conserving water. But it was very clear that the appearance of their yards was a big issue.

"That was a strong message," she said.

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Water wisdom

Annual rainfall necessary to sustain various plants:

Grass: 45.1 inches

Medium water-use plants: 33.8 inches

Low water-use plants: 16.9 inches

California native plants: 11.3 inches

Source: Western Municipal Water District