

From lawn to native yard: 3 homeowners share strategies, budgets

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The Menlo Park family of Catherine Carlton includes two toddlers, George, 2,



San Jose homeowner Joanne Curme was tired of her lawn and its never-ending cycle of mow-weed-water-repeat. Kim Tarman of San Ramon longed for a yard with vibrant colors. And Arvind Kumar of San Jose had had it with broken sprinkler heads and dead splotches of lawn.

All three ditched their conventional lawns and joined the growing number of Bay Area residents replacing their grass yards with drought-resistant plants and California natives. Interest in the water- and timesaving gardening method has led to a flood of free classes, drought-resistant gardening books and annual tours organized by nonprofit groups.

Because conventional lawns use so much precious water, a lot of people think water-wise gardening is the right thing to do, said San Jose landscape architect Sherri Osaka, who specializes in designing Bay Area gardens containing drought-resistant plants.

"A lot of times they are sick of maintenance, and they want lower water use. Those two things go hand-in-hand."

Financial incentives are helping the trend. Since half of all water consumption is used on landscapes, the Santa Clara Valley Water District offers rebates of as much as \$3,000 for residents who replace thirsty grass lawns with low-water-use plants. Last year alone, more than 300 customers received rebates, said Virginia O'Rourke, water conservation specialist with the agency. East Bay Municipal Utility District offers rebates of up to \$500 to customers who convert conventional lawns to a sustainable landscape.

Here are the stories behind the transformations of the Curme, Tarman and Kumar yards. Each homeowner had a different vision and a different budget in mind:

The DIY yard

Curme, an avid do-it-yourselfer, installed her new garden over a period of six months. Today, her front yard is a collection of greenery and flowers that attracts dragonflies, hummingbirds, butterflies and bees. There are bright red and lavender yarrow flowers, pink rosy buckwheat plants and yellow sticky monkey blooms.

Sometimes passers-by admire the view from a seat on the decorative stone bench she placed near the street facing her tiny but lush 18-by-30-foot yard, which she estimates uses 80 percent less water than before and requires far less upkeep.

And, as Curme discovered, becoming eco-friendly can be easy on the wallet.

When she needed bricks to make a low garden wall, she got them for free from Freecycle Network, a recycling group (www.freecycle.org). A friend with a jackhammer helped her tear out an old concrete walkway.

In all, the budget-conscious Curme paid about \$1,000 to redo her front yard last year. About half of that cost went to pay for plants; to stretch each dollar, she only bought those in 4-inch pots, knowing they would grow taller and thicker over time. She also purchased a dozen 50-pound bags of sand to mix with the yard's clay-heavy soil to improve drainage and installed a drip-water irrigation system that more efficiently delivers water directly to plant roots. The result was the dramatic drop in water use.

Curme said one of her most valuable purchases was the \$200 paid to a local landscape designer to draw up a yard plan that mapped out the plants that would grow best in her yard, based on sun exposure and the location of the water table. She also wanted a garden with plenty of year-round color, one where "when one plant died down, another would be in bloom," she said.

"I wanted things to be as lush as possible. That was really important to me."

The colorful yard

Having plenty of color in her front yard was also important for Kim Tarman of San Ramon, who put in a low-water garden last fall. "Some people prefer serene gardens with grasses blowing in the wind. I wanted a joyful garden of color," she said.

From a breakfast nook table positioned just inside a front picture window, Tarman can watch hummingbirds sip from the salvia blooms, see bees zip to the lavender plants and spy on yellow swallowtail butterflies as they head for the verbena. "It's really a natural garden for wildlife" with colorful blooms that have become even more vibrant during the summer months, she said.

To educate herself about low-water plants, Tarman, a longtime gardening hobbyist, read a host of gardening books. The most useful and comprehensive, she said, was "Plants and Landscapes For Summer-Dry Climates of the San Francisco Bay Region," published by the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Her garden took three days and about \$2,200 to create, including plants purchased from a conventional wholesale nursery, rock used for decorative, low walls, flagstone to make a walking path, a stone bench and a new drip irrigation system. The cost also included labor — a gardener completed the work.

Now Tarman is watering only twice a week, a big change from when she had a lawn. That adds up to 60 percent less water use during the hot summer months. "My water bill definitely reflects that," she said.

Maintenance has also turned out to be easier than she expected compared with her lawn. A thick layer of mulch was applied to help keep the soil moist and repel weeds. If weeds appear, their roots extend only into the thick mulch, so she can easily pull them out by hand. She spends about five minutes weeding once a month.

The upscale makeover

Some water-wise garden newbies might yearn for a mature native yard like Arvind Kumar's.

In 2001, a year after joining the local chapter of the California Native Plant Society, the San Jose resident spent \$26,000 to have a designer create and contractors install a drought-resistant landscape in his sizable front and rear yards. He had grown tired of the constant broken sprinkler heads and dead grass.

The pricey makeover included the addition of a flagstone path and about \$2,000 worth of plants, most of them larger specimens sold in one-gallon pots.

For the first three or four summers, Kumar watered the new plants about once a week. "But the older they get, the less water they need," he said. Now, he waters so infrequently that his household sees a water bill of only \$30 a month.

While a maintenance professional kept up the yard for its first several years, Kumar — who is now on the statewide board of directors for the Native Plant Society — handles that work himself these days, including adding new plants from time to time. He spends about four hours a month, year round, on his front and backyards.

Now, rather than maintain a large grass lawn, he gazes out his living room window to see birds feeding on fruit from a blue elderberry tree.

"A garden is full of living things that are sometimes going to grow in unexpected ways," he said. "Part of the fun of gardening is really discovering those changes and adapting to them. It makes life much more interesting to me."

- Plan now, plant later. For inspiration, visit homeowners' native gardens on one of the annual native plant garden tours held each spring (see Resources box at far right for details). The best time to plant natives is during the Bay Area's October through March rainy season so the tender youngsters have a chance to get established.
- Want to plant this summer? Be prepared to use your irrigation system or hand-water newly planted items weekly during their first year, said Arvind Kumar of the California Native Plant Society. Water once every two weeks during their second year and once every three weeks during their third. By a plant's fourth year, once its roots are sturdy, it will probably need watering only once a month during the dry season, if at all.
- Hire a designer. Even do-it-yourselfers say an expert will help you avoid costly and disheartening mistakes by suggesting the best native plants for your yard based on sun exposure, soil composition, size and other factors. Cost for these professionals varies, but expect to pay \$100 to \$150 an hour.
- Buy small. You'll be able to afford more plants if you choose those in 4-inch to 6-inch containers. They typically mature in just a few years.
- Don't crowd the plants. Make sure there's enough space for when the plants have grown taller and have filled out.
- Many general nurseries carry native plants, but check specialty native nurseries for the widest variety. If the plants you want are not in stock, see if the nursery will order them for you. The University of California Botanical Garden at Berkeley also sells native plants (<http://botanicalgarden.berkeley.edu>).
- Never assume that because you have a native plant, you can "throw it in the ground, walk away and never water it again," said Anthony Garza Jr., supervisor of horticulture and grounds at the UC Botanical Garden. Some require supplemental irrigation on a temporary or even permanent basis, Garza said.

WATER-WISE RESOURCES

Many organizations offer help to people planning to switch to a water-wise yard. Some resources:

BOOKS:

"Gardening With a Wild Heart: Restoring California's Native Landscapes at Home" by Judith Lerner Lowry

"Plants and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates of the San Francisco Bay Region" by the East Bay Municipal Utility District

"Sunset Western Garden Book" by Sunset Publishing

More on drought-tolerant gardening: [http://
gardeningwithnatives.com/Books/books.html](http://gardeningwithnatives.com/Books/books.html).

GROUPS, CLASSES:

Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency of San Mateo. For details on free classes, go to <http://bawsca.org> and click on "Landscape Education Program."

California Native Garden Foundation. Nonprofit education group affiliated with San Jose's Middlebrook Gardens nursery sponsors adults and school group classes. www.cngf.org.

California Native Plant Society. Several regional chapters and many class offerings. www.cnps.org.

Regional Parks Botanic Garden in Berkeley. Find a list of upcoming classes at www.nativeplants.org/events.html.

Stanford University Continuing Education. Offers "Designing Your California Native Plant Garden." <http://continuingstudies.stanford.edu/courses>.

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TOURS:

Springtime tours include Going Native Garden Tour (www.goingnativegarden.tour.org); Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour (www.bringingbackthenatives.net); and Bay-Friendly Garden Tour (www.stopwaste.org).

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