



Waste No Water

Communities Get Creative in Urging Conservation

by April Thompson

As fresh water becomes increasingly scarce worldwide, communities are coming together to find creative solutions to conserve it. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the average American family uses some 300 gallons of water a day at home, nearly a third of which lands on lawns and yardscapes. Yet simple solutions like installing low-flow showerheads, turning off the tap while brushing teeth and installing drought-friendly landscaping can save a householder thousands of gallons a year and big money on water bills.

The Irvine, California, Wyland Foundation created the Mayor's Challenge for Water Conservation seven years ago to stimulate awareness and action around water waste by tapping into civic pride and a healthy sense of competition. "What we do at home has a big impact on what happens to natural resources 1,000 miles downstream," says Steve Creech, executive director of the nonprofit, founded by marine life artist Robert Wyland to foster healthy oceans and waterways.

The program pits cities against each other every April to see which one can garner the most water-saving pledges from residents. Prizes for participants include a year's worth of utility bills paid, green home cleaning kits and low-flow shower heads. It also provides immediate feedback on rankings at *MyWaterPledge.com*. As of May, 616,000 participants in 4,800 towns and cities had pledged to save 3 billion gallons per year.

"Many are attracted by prizes, but over time, become more interested in conservation and sustainability," observes Creech. "Social modeling is important because people get activated when they see friends and family involved. Surveys also show that we look to local leaders on issues like this, so it makes a difference when mayors take a stance."

Mesa, Arizona's thirsty desert lawns and gardens suck thousands of gallons of precious water a day. Nearly 20 years ago, the city joined forces with Phoenix and Scottsdale to launch a water conservation campaign that has become among the largest of its kind. Today, hundreds of private and public partners across North America

use the Water – Use It Wisely program to turn the tide on water waste (*WaterUseIt-Wisely.com*).

Creative approaches go a long way in encouraging households to save water, says Donna DiFrancesco, conservation coordinator for the city of Mesa. Its campaign newsletter speaks to 26,000 subscribers. Some 100 water-saving devices and symbols remind consumers to think about how they use water in everyday life. A traveling, 16-foot water tower made of water jugs represents the 120 gallons of water the average person uses per day in Arizona. They even challenge residents to “help your yard drink responsibly” through the Drab to Fab Backyard Rehab campaign, rewriting the narrative that sustainable is synonymous with sacrifice. In its second year, more than 11,500 entrants throughout the state put their creativity to work in revamping their backyards.

To promote behavior change, Creech suggests that providing justifications for each water-saving action is key. When citizens become more conscious of how they waste the most water, they are more motivated to act. Repairing toilet and pool leaks and exchanging baths for showers are common fixes.

“The 40 Gallon Challenge is designed to help people find the ‘low-hanging fruit’ in their water use—such as a leaky faucet or a long shower—that can readily help save 40 gallons a day,” says Ellen Bauske, program coordinator for this initiative of the Center for Urban Agriculture at the University of Georgia, in Griffin (*40GallonChallenge.com*). It’s designed to be flexible so states and municipalities can address the local context.

“It’s been great to see the creative ways it’s been adapted; for example, one agent used the pledge as a scavenger hunt item for 4H clubs,” Bauske notes. More than 11,000 people have taken this pledge across America, potentially saving 1.9 million gallons a day.

It can be difficult to measure the real water savings of such challenges, but DiFrancesco says that Mesa has seen a roughly 20 percent reduction in water use since 1999, when the local campaign began to take off. Drop by drop, small acts

taken collectively by engaged citizens add up to big savings.

Find water-saving tips at HomeAdvisor.com/r/home-water-conservation and NationalGeographic.com/environment/freshwater/water-conservation-tips.

Connect with April Thompson, in Washington, D.C., at AprilWrites.com.

How to Start Conserving Today

According to the Alliance for Water Efficiency, if every American cut their water use by 25 percent, the nation would save 2.8 trillion gallons in a year; household faucet leaks alone are estimated to waste 1 trillion gallons annually. Opportunities to save water are everywhere.

Here are a few examples for the home, office and lawn, from Water – Use It Wisely’s 100+ Ways to Conserve Water (*Tinyurl.com/100WaysToConserveWater*).

Kitchen: Wash produce in a pot of water instead of running the tap, then reuse the water to quench house plants.

Bathroom: Save up to 1,000 gallons per month simply by showering for less than five minutes.

Laundry room: If city and county codes allow it, have a plumber reroute household gray water to irrigate exterior landscaping rather than losing it to the sewer line.

Lawn: Save up to 1,000 gallons a year by refraining from watering the lawn on windy days, when most of the water can blow away.

Landscape: Spreading organic mulch around plants helps them retain moisture and fend off evaporation, while deterring the growth of water-sucking weeds. Watering in the early morning, when temperatures are low, minimizes evaporation. Use a rain barrel for hand-watering and zone plants by level of drought tolerance.

Pool: Use a pool cover and keep water levels to a minimum to reduce water loss and additions of fresh water and chemicals.

Office: Conduct a water audit to see where it’s easiest to save water and put in place a water management plan to address any issues. Promote awareness through a company newsletter to encourage employee water-saving efforts.