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'Blue Thumb' participants save water

17 Cresthaven families involved in innovative water-wise landscaping program

By Sena Christian, The Press Tribune



Photo by Philip Wood

Larry Bergeron says residents in his Cresthaven neighborhood of Roseville have started watering their lawns at night to prevent evaporation and save water.



Sometimes when people pass by one particular house in the Cresthaven neighborhood of Roseville, they stop and stare.

They see a dozen or so cactus, lavender and other drought-tolerant plants native to northern California. They see a newly planted crape myrtle tree. But mostly, they notice how there's no grass, only shredded bark.

The homeowners of this residence, Charlie and Jan Catlin, participated in their neighborhood's "Blue Thumb" program, sponsored by the Regional Water Authority, City of Roseville and California Department of Water Resources.

The Catlins are one of 17 Cresthaven families involved in this innovative water-wise landscaping program. Larry Bergeron, vice president of the [Cresthaven Neighborhood Association](#), said the couple's front yard showcases the conservation and aesthetic benefits of eco-friendly landscaping.

"The grass was dead most of the time," Charlie Catlin said. "We hadn't taken good care of it. I didn't like taking care of it anyhow, to tell you the truth."

The Regional Water Authority, which represents 19 water providers in the region, launched [Blue Thumb](#)

last year to promote landscape water efficiency throughout Placer and Sacramento counties.

More than 65 percent of a household's annual water consumption typically goes to landscape irrigation. Of that, 30 percent is lost due to over watering or evaporation.

In February 2010, the Regional Water Authority approached the Cresthaven Neighborhood Association to see if the group would help pilot Blue Thumb on a neighborhood scale.

Bergeron, who has lived in Roseville since 1986, said Cresthaven was chosen because the community is well known for its active residents. The area — bordered by Cirby Way on the north, Cirby Hills Ways on the east, Citrus Heights on the south and Union Pacific Railroad on the west — has 1,500 residences and 60 businesses.

"All of us pretty much know each other," he said.

This familiarity came in handy for promoting the program, which involved community-based social marketing, Bergeron said. His association presented the program to neighbors and encouraged their buy-in.

They asked 26 residents and 17 agreed — this group attended seminars and received free consultations from landscape and irrigation experts on sustainable landscape design, plant selections and efficient watering.

"Residents were given an open opportunity to do what they can with their own financial resources," Bergeron said.

For the Catlins, a landscape architect drew up plans, which involved replacing water-thirsty grass with shredded bark and installing drip irrigation instead of sprinklers. A weed blocker underneath the bark prevents weeds — and the subsequent use of toxic pesticides. A rock bed stops water from pooling in the yard, as it previously did.

Jan and Charlie Catlin stayed within their \$5,000 budget by taking advantage of the city's Cash for Grass Rebate Program, which rebates customers \$1 per square foot of lawn removed — up to \$1,000 — and replaced with water-efficient landscape.

The Catlins said their water usage has decreased nearly 30 percent since their yard's renovation was finished in November.

"Truly, I think everyone in the neighborhood should do it," Jan Catlin said.

A landscape architect also visited Bergeron's house and drew up plans. So far, he has installed low-flow faucets and showerheads throughout his house. Landscape will follow this spring.

One of Bergeron's biggest changes, though, has been behavior. He used to water his lawn 30 minutes during the day. Now, he waters five minutes early in the morning and at night, when no evaporation occurs. His neighbors across the street water at night now, too.

"We want to encourage people to do the (Blue Thumb program), don't spend a fortune, take a little time and do what you can," Bergeron said.

Cresthaven's commitment to the project is garnering notice. In May, representatives from the Cresthaven Neighborhood Association and Roseville Coalition of Neighborhood Associations will participate in the Neighborhoods USA national convention in Anchorage, Alaska.

Cresthaven is up for the Neighborhood of the Year Award for "Physical Revitalization/Beautification in a Single Neighborhood," which recognizes exceptional accomplishments of innovation and neighborhood grassroots participation.

As for residents, they keep making progress on their own Blue Thumb projects. Resident Jack Wallace plans to eliminate one-half of his front lawn — he just doesn't see the need for all that grass, which requires so much upkeep.

"The landscaping expert asked an interesting question: How much do you actually use your front yard?" Wallace said. "That's a good question for everybody."

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For more information about the "Blue Thumb" program, visit www.bewatersmart.info.