

THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA
REGISTER

Save water, get paid

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You know how you start to fix a leaky sink and, trip-by-trip to the hardware store, you discover the simple job is a lot more complex than you thought?

Landscaping's like that too.

Just ask Quan and Angelina Ha.

They are the Orange couple who swapped grass for woodchips, fought City Hall for the right to landscape their yard as they wished, helped ease the county's water shortage and saved themselves more than a few bucks.

I'm for all of those things, especially the saving money part. My wife especially likes the saving the environment part.

But the more research I did, the more I discovered we may be able to learn more – and save more – by *not* following the Has' example.

And the cool thing is we'll get paid for it.

Ha told me that before they tore up their lawn they used nearly 150,000 gallons of water a month and paid about \$80 a month for the privilege. Now, in a typical month, they use 29,000 gallons and spend \$12.

But they did pay a different kind of price – angering some neighbors, not to mention City Hall.

How did Ha go about it? First, Ha said the couple drove around and looked at some yards with drought resistant plants. Then he ripped out his lawn, put up a nice wood fence, spread wood chips around the yard to appease City Hall and, eventually, added some non-thirsty plants.

I probably would have tackled the project the same way. Hey, I'm the kind of gardener who bought a cute little tree for our first house never thinking about roots or its eventual size until the day my wall started to crack.

But my wife is more forgiving than my editors, who expect a little homework. Go figure.

At each of the major water works agencies that serve Orange County, I found free online information, videos, in-person classes on water-saving landscaping – and actual rebates that pay actual money for helping save the environment.

“Unfortunately, ripping out your lawn is not the best way to save water,” Orange public affairs manager said in a tone so dry it would suck water from Death Valley.

“It creates a dust bowl effect.”

Dust bowls are not a good thing, water experts agreed.

And they agreed on something else. Ferns, fronds and flowers aside, Orange County has a semi-arid environment. This means we don't get enough rain to support the agriculture, businesses and the three million-plus people who live here.

OK, we understand we're not supposed to hose off our cars, hose down the driveway or let the tap run while we brush our teeth.

But what does that mean during spring – our prime planting season?

“Every individual,” said Dan Ferons, chief engineer for the Santa Margarita Water District (serves south county), “can make a difference.

“You can have drought tolerant plants and still have a very attractive yard,” Ferons told me.

“We're importing water from 200 miles away. It's expensive. The more you save, the better it is for your pocketbook and the better it is for the environment.”

Jenny Rigby understands conservation. A visit to her environmental educational supply business, Acorn Naturalists, in Tustin is like seeing another world – a world not unlike Orange County was before we installed sprinklers.

Rigby called her grounds a “water-wise garden” and explained it needs no irrigation and zero fertilization. The Rigbys, with the help of the Tree of Life Nursery off Ortega Highway, watch wild flowers bloom and other plants thrive year-round, even in the heat of August.

So what about the rebate bucks?

Buy a weather-based irrigation controller, get \$80. A rotating sprinkler nozzle gets you a minimum of \$4 a nozzle. Synthetic turf pays 60 cents a square foot. And ripping out your lawn for drought tolerant plants gets you \$1 per square foot.

For more, check **BeWaterWise.com** and **SoCalWaterSmart.com**.

Curious if other Orange residents have had the same battles with City Hall as the Has, I talked to Ben Dieppa, an Orange resident who tore out his own lawn last year and landscaped it with an array of drought-friendly plants.

Dieppa said he hasn't heard from the city. But he has heard from his neighbors. They like what they see – a variety of Mediterranean plants, some blooming.

He offered three tips for success: First, take time to learn. Second, plan. Third, get a variety of sun-happy plants. He added that if something doesn't thrive, pull it and try something else.

Ha told me he and the city have settled their differences, although the Has have a way to go before they reach the city-mandated 40 percent live ground coverage.

Regardless, the Has meant well. Consider they bought their home eight years ago for \$345,000, an enormous investment.

Religious people, Ha told me, "This whole yard thing happened for a reason."

Perhaps it was to help spread the word that in a land where there isn't much rain, there are, thankfully, rebates.

To save water, see BeWaterWise.com and SoCalWaterSmart.com.





