



By Sedona Callahan

Photo by Timothy Thimmes

We bought a Park Meadows house with a big backyard — perfect for kids of all ages and their dogs. But after a six-years-and-counting drought that turned the lawn brown in the hottest months of summer, we found ourselves avoiding the dull, patchy areas we expected to be playing in.

Our choice: we could either pay exorbitant water rates to keep the lawn green (and incur the righteous stares of our neighbors with “every third day” water placards posted on their front lawns), or replace the grass with materials that needed little or no water.

Our first step was to go to a local nursery for a landscape plan that reflected our interest in creating a beautiful and usable area, while conserving water as much as possible. We organized a list of trees and plants that can survive the high desert mountain

region that we call home. Then off we went to a Brown’s Canyon quarry, where we purchased enough stone to build an 1,100-square-foot flagstone patio, wrapped with a low seating wall. Surrounding the patio area, we planted drought-tolerant trees and shrubs that require little to no additional watering, adding shade, color and texture to the formerly drab backyard. The former grassy area under the trees has been covered with a moisture-saving red-wood bark. Flush with success, we added an enclosed pergola on the red-

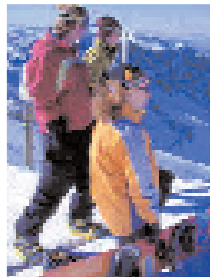
wood deck that stretches the length of the house, providing a private space for early morning coffee, reading, or quiet conversations.

Montgomery Watson Harza reported in the May, 2000 “Water Supply and Water Demand” report that 69 percent of the water usage in Park City from June through September is attributed to irrigation. In order to conserve water (a limited resource in Utah), outside watering of lawns and landscaped areas using city water is restricted to every other day from May 1 to September 30. Kathy Gammel, Park City’s water manager, says the city has proactively promoted water conservation since 1984, when the City Council adopted a water conservation ordinance. But with the current and frequently recurring drought periods, water conservation will always be a high priority for Park City.

Jerry Gibbs, public works administrator for Park City, echoes Gammel’s concerns, saying the city is considering possible incentive options for residents who convert their water-thirsty lawns to landscapes that are more consistent with the desert region in which we live. “No plans are finalized,” Gibbs stresses, “but maybe [we could make available] deeper discounts at local nurseries when they make purchases consistent with drought conditions.” Gibbs says that a continuation of rising water rates may be the biggest incentive to would-be conservationists, however. “The biggest advantage people will see is when they open their monthly water bills.”

Diane Murphy and her husband Hutch Foster, Silver Summit residents, have embarked on a backyard/front yard conversion from grass to hardscape in a planned two-year phase. “We wanted to reduce the lawn area but leave some for the dogs,” said Murphy. “We did a lot of the work ourselves, with rock, patio, and native plants, but we didn’t want to pull all the grass out in the first year, leading our neighbors to think that xeriscaping is ugly.” Murphy and Foster replaced grassy areas with mulch, gravel, several large stones that provide vertical interest, and flagstone walkways that lead to the back of the house. “We used native plants such as aspens, Nanking cher-

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ries, a lot of snow-in-summer, sedum, woolly thyme, currants, red-twigged rose bushes, Scotch and Austrian pines,” Murphy said. In their backyard, one-third of the area was left with grass. Much of the remaining area was converted to patio and deck. In addition, Murphy and Foster installed a sensor that shuts off the sprinkler system when it rains.

A self-described landscape “putterer,” Bill Gunter, owner of the landscape company Back of the Front Designs, has responded to the ongoing need for water restriction by removing grass in his own yard and putting in a water feature that has less water evaporation than grass does. “I put in a vegetable garden with a spring flowing from there,” Gunter said. “It cascades over a fall into a pond, which divides into two streams around an island, then falls into a second pond filled with glacier boulders. That falls into a bog, where I intend to plant cattails.” Gunter describes his conversion as a work in progress, but stresses that the water used is recycled throughout the system.

Aside from his personal landscape

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design, Gunter has helped several Park City residents replace their water-guzzling lawns with hardscapes and xeriscapes. Gunter says some people are inspired to be good neighbors and conserve water, but others are motivated to create more usable space in their outdoor environments. “Many people find lawns boring. There’s no interesting place to go to. They also recognize that lawns are a lot of work and they’re tired of spending their summers taking care of them. With a xeriscape landscape, you can spend one hour every other week fixing things up.” Gunter designs landscapes as an extension of a client’s home, with spaces that people can relate to. “I’ll create a patio, pergola, a rock to sit on. I make trails so people can walk

around plants of varied shapes and textures,” said Gunter, who chooses from a wide pallet of trees and shrubs that adapt well to the mountain climate without overusing water. “In my opinion, there’s been an overuse of aspens, and spruces are susceptible to disease in parts of Park City. I like to use Amur and Norwegian Maples, and indigenous plants like Mountain Mahogany. Some of the older standard varieties of apples do well here, as well as crabapples, chokecherries, and Nanking cherries.”

While Park City does not currently have an ordinance that requires drought-tolerant plants, Park City’s Planning Department strongly encourages reduced consumption of water for irrigation. Gibbs adds, “We need to manage our resources. People need to think conservation whether we have a wet or dry year.” £

Sedona Callahan is a Park City-based writer and photographer, and now, thanks to her backyard conversion from lawn to flagstone patio, she can drive a forklift and tractor. Repair to the gate is imminent.

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