

Drought prompts residential water conservation

by Lyndsey Taylor

Some Northwest Austinites address dry conditions with creative solutions

Northwest Austin residents are finding innovative ways to address the ongoing drought and need for water conservation as city restrictions become more stringent.

Their efforts are a result of the drought that the Lower Colorado River Authority expects to continue this summer. The region's primary water source—the Highland Lakes—is unlikely to be replenished any time soon, despite some storms that have hit Central Texas. The Austin, Buchanan, Inks, Lady Bird, Marble Falls and Travis lakes form the Highland Lakes.

“We do expect the drought to continue,” said Ryan Rowney, LCRA executive manager of water operations. “We are encouraging conservation with our customers.”

LCRA General Manager Becky Motal said the organization is focused on developing new water supplies and encouraging conservation. Motal said that for residents to help conserve water, they should be aware of their watering restrictions and follow them. She advised residents also conserve as much water as possible and fix leaks.

“Water is a precious commodity, but we all need to be mindful that it also needs to be shared,” Motal said.

Daryl Slusher, assistant director at Austin Water Utility for environmental affairs, said that in general, a resident in Austin uses about 1,000–2,000 gallons of water indoors per month, depending on the age of plumbing fixtures and appliances. He said Austin Water customers can better understand how much water they use by looking at their bills. Simple steps such as reducing the amount of time a sprinkler is used by 2 minutes can reduce water usage and cost, usually with little effect on the landscape, Slusher said.

Motal said that if each person in Austin reduced water usage by 1,000 gallons, it would make a big difference on the water supply. As Austin continues to grow, she encouraged residents to be conscious of water supply that will be needed in the future.

“We—as this generation—need to be thinking about the next generation and what are we going to do to conserve, develop and pay for those new supplies of water so that even when we have a drought, we can get through it,” she said.

For more information about the state of the drought, see Page 8.

Local restrictions and creative solutions

Since September 2012, the city of Austin's watering restrictions have prohibited residents from washing their vehicles at home and from having fountains with a waterfall or spray greater than 4 inches.

City restrictions were revised after extensive public input and affected the once-per-week watering schedule. Watering restrictions for residential and commercial properties depend on the property's address and type of watering system such as automatic sprinklers.

To enforce the city's water restrictions, Slusher said Austin Water will start fining customers who violate watering restrictions. Under this new system, violators would receive a \$75 fine per day for each witnessed violation.

To encourage residents to conserve water, the city of Austin offers rebates and programs. For example, an Austin Water residential customer could receive a rebate of \$40 when the customer purchases two water hose timers. The city also offers a landscaping rebate for removing grass that needs a great deal of watering.

Swapping water-loving plants for ones that need little or no water is one method of conservation used by some residents. Joyce Statz, a Northwest Austin Civic Association board member, said she is pleasantly surprised at the volume of Northwest Austin residents who are digging up their front lawns to replace grass with native plants that are more drought- and deer-resistant.

"We've been promoting, through neighborhood seminars and educational materials, ideas for people about how they can improve the quality, if you will, of their landscapes without using a whole lot of water and without putting in plants that don't survive the wildlife or the drought," Statz said.

NWACA is providing residents with information about where to find demonstration gardens in its newsletters.

Sheryl Williams, a Northwest Austin resident and certified master gardener since 2010, said she uses rainwater collection barrels and ditches that she dug around the perimeter of her house to hold rainwater for plants that need more moisture. The ditches hold so much moisture that she does not have to irrigate, she said.

"It holds the water in the ditch, and my plants—because they are on top of the berm—they get moisture much longer than anywhere else because I am using the soil as my water collection system," Williams said.

Master gardeners are certified and trained volunteers who help others garden in communities.

Williams said her philosophy is never to let any water leave her property, whether that be rain or drip water from her air conditioner. Although Austin might experience a shortage in rainwater, it is still possible to conserve it through collection, she said.

"If this isn't the perfect climate for rainwater capture, then I don't know what is," Williams said.