

New practices taking root in the Okanagan

By Charlotte Helston



Anna Anderson is hoping her Go Golden project will raise awareness about water use in the Okanagan.

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VERNON - Whether it's embracing a yellowed lawn, or landscaping with drought resistant plants, residents in the Okanagan Valley are finding ways to conserve water, time and money in their backyards this summer.

For a passionate Vernon teen, it's about having pride in a yard not green but gold. Anna Anderson, 17, is encouraging residents to Go Golden and let their lawns fade to yellow over the next couple months instead of keeping them green with steady watering.

"We live in a semi-arid desert, and we seem to be fighting that rather than embracing it," Anderson, who came up with the initiative as part of a school assignment, says. "Living in the Okanagan with all the lakes around us, we have this illusion that water is unlimited, but it's not."

According to Okanagan WaterWise, 24 per cent of all Okanagan water is used outside of homes, mostly on lawns and gardens. Another staggering fact is that there is less water available per person in the Okanagan than anywhere else in Canada.

"People might think it looks neglectful, but by not watering their lawn, they're taking care of more than just their property. They're being responsible for the environment and the world," Anderson says. "The purpose (of the project) is to remove the embarrassment (of a golden lawn)."

Okanagan residents love their lawns and gardens, with the average person using 675 litres of water daily, compared to the 329 used by the average Canadian, according to Okanagan WaterWise.

"I hope in the community that we all become a little more aware of our water use," Anderson says. "I'd like to see a change in attitude where not watering your lawn isn't lazy or neglectful, but responsible."

For those that aren't keen on a golden yard, there are other alternatives taking root. In the past seven years, Vernon landscaper Vince VanBeelen says xeriscaping—from the Greek xeri meaning dry—has quickly been gaining popularity. In xeriscaping, drought resistant plants are selected and planted in mulch, or sometimes rock, and turf is either minimized or completely eliminated.

VanBeelen says the style uses far less water, and is much easier to maintain. He says he's converted so many turf lawns to xeriscape gardens that he's lost count.

"Everyone wants that low maintenance, and they like the idea of not having to use so much water or chemicals," he says.

Client Bill Ripley loves his xeriscape garden and says he receives a "constant series of compliments" on it. Before the transformation, Ripley's front yard consisted of a few plants and shrubs filled in with gravel.

"The primary reason was to get rid of the weeds," he says, noting he can count the amount of weeds he's had to pull since the new garden went in.

With xeriscape, property owners are saved the constant upkeep of a turf lawn, including watering and mowing it, which can add up to over a thousand dollars a year according to VanBeelen.

"You get to do away with all that," Ripley says.

Japanese barberry, lavender, day lily, and russian sage are just some of the species that thrive in the Okanagan climate, VanBeelen says.

Gwen Steele, the co-founder and executive director of the Okanagan Xeriscape Association, says one of the biggest misconceptions about xeriscapes is that they're "boring" and "ugly".

"You're creating biodiversity in your yard, just like in nature," she says. "The conventional default landscape in the Okanagan is, unfortunately, lawn and cedar hedges that use a lot of water, are high maintenance and are boring to look at."

While the initial cost of creating a xeriscape is higher than rolling out turf (VanBeelen says the cost can be up to \$10,000), over the long term, champions of xeriscaping say the long-term savings make up for it. Over a period of 20 years, Steele says the cost of xeriscaping is about five times less than a conventional lawn or garden.

"You're working with mother nature rather than fighting it," Steele says. "It's a very ethical thing to do. It's the power one person has to make a difference."

To get involved in Anderson's Go Golden challenge, email go.golden2013@gmail.com or register at the [Golden Lawn Competition on facebook](#). One lucky golden resident will win a three day retreat at La Casa Cottage Resort in Kelowna.

More information about xeriscaping can be found [on the Okanagan Xeriscaping Association website](#), which includes a plant database of suitable species for our climate.

Okanagan WaterWise is also [holding a contest where participants take pledges](#) to be water-wise. Participants have the chance to win \$5,000 in water-wise lawn upgrades as part of the event.