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Record participation for 'Make Water Work' contest



Kelowna resident Gena Sherwood is the \$6,000 WaterWise Yard Upgrade grand prize winner. — Image Credit: Contributed



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There are signs for the Okanagan Basin Water Board that the message to conserve water is starting to register with Okanagan residents.

The water board says a record number of participants took part in the Make Water Work contest this summer, with Kelowna resident Gena Sherwood winning the grand prize of a \$6,000 WaterWise Yard Upgrade while the City of Armstrong is the new Make Water Work Champion.

Make Water Work (MWW) is a residential outdoor water conservation initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board's Okanagan WaterWise program and local government and utility partners throughout the valley, recognizing we're all part of "One valley. One water."

The initiative tackles the second largest use of water in the Okanagan— outdoor residential landscapes (mostly lawn) which account for 24 per cent of all water used.

Residents are provided with tips to make water work more effectively and efficiently in their yards, and encouraged to Take the Pledge online at www.MakeWaterWork.ca and then entered to win WaterWise yard prizes.

"We're thrilled with the results. In all, at least 939 residents took the pledge," noted Corinne Jackson, communications director with the OBWB and in charge of the Okanagan WaterWise program. "It's the greatest number we've had since we began collecting pledges in 2012."

Sherwood won a \$6,000 WaterWise yard upgrade by following through on six personal pledges:

- Water plants. Not pavement.
- Water between dusk and dawn.
- Don't mow. Let it Grow. Leave lawn five to eight centimetres (two to three inches) tall.
- Leave grass clippings as mulch.
- Top dress with compost; and
- Change out some lawn for drought-tolerant turf and/or native and low-water variety plants.

"I'm extremely excited," said Sherwood. "Redoing our landscape to be more WaterWise has been a project we've been wanting to do, so this will definitely help."

Earlier this summer, Sherwood said she planted low-water plants in the front and let her lawn go dormant, understanding the need to conserve through this drought. "It will come back," she laughed. "Ultimately though, I want something easy to care for and that respects the environment. I don't want to have to water."

As part of the prize package, KelownaGardens.com will now do an audit of Sherwood's family's property and work with her to determine what would be best, whether it's proper irrigation thanks to ProSource Irrigation, additional WaterWise plants from Bylands Nursery and/or a conversion to drought-tolerant lawn from Eco-Turf.

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Just as excited as Sherwood, is City of Armstrong Mayor Chris Pieper at his community's win. "We're pretty proud when we win any award, but winning this is a community victory. That's what makes it a true win."

Pieper noted that after joining valley mayors to take the pledge at this year's Make Water Work launch event in May in West Kelowna, he went back to his home community and started to push the message.

"I didn't do it alone," he added, noting staff started talking with residents as they came in at tax time, reminding them to conserve and encouraging them to take the pledge, even handing out special MWW Frisbees to help them make water work more effectively.

The city has also installed water meters and has been providing residents with mock bills showing how much they will be charged once pay-for-what-you-use billing come into effect. Again, the last set of mock bills were used as an opportunity to provide residents with tips to make water work.

And then, in mid-July, when the province asked Okanagan communities to cut water use by 30 per cent in an effort to help the region through the drought Armstrong implemented Stage 2 water restrictions, banning lawn-watering and automatic irrigation use, and allowing only hand-watering on plant material on alternate days.

Enforcement was increased and a few warnings were handed out, but no 2nd warning were required, added Pieper. And for its part, the municipality turned off boulevard sprinklers and only watered planter boxes. In response, Armstrong residents reduced use by 40 per cent, noted Pieper.

Based on the effectiveness of their efforts, the city went back to Stage 1 (odd-even) watering restrictions two weeks ago, allowing watering between 6 to 10 a.m. and 7 to 11 p.m. (during cooler parts of the day to prevent evaporation) but continued to ban lawn-watering. Grass sprinklers on city property have also been turned off for the rest of the year.

"We want to see if we can do it based on the honour system and still save the 30% requested by the province. We're hoping our community will take it seriously and stay WaterWise," noted Pieper.

"I think our community has really bought into water conservation and I see it across the valley – a recognition of the need to protect our water. People are talking about water, the forest fires, the drought. I think awareness is top of mind for people and they're concerned."

Jackson agreed. "Although the number of those taking the pledge has been climbing year after year and should be celebrated, we know that this does not fully account for the number of people who are hearing the conservation message and making changes to be WaterWise."

"Given the climate in the Okanagan and the forecast for the coming fall and winter, with another low snowpack, it's going to be important that we all do our part to help protect the water of our valley, making sure we save enough for food, the fish and firefighting."

With water still needed for farm crops and returning salmon this fall, residents are encouraged to continue to conserve and Make Water Work best. Find tips, including the new Make Water Work Plant Collection, at www.MakeWaterWork.ca.

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