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Make Water Work: Choose plants suitable for our dry climate

By **JUDIE STEEVES**

September 11, 2015 · 9:50 AM

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Water is not necessary to create colour and beauty in your home landscapes, according to Eva Antonijevic, community programs director for the Friends of the Summerland Ornamental Gardens (SOG).

“Drought-tolerant landscapes are not just gravel and yucca. They can be vibrant with colour,” she says, pointing to the Welcome Garden, where simple white flowers of a Japanese aster form a bright cloud beside the vibrant rose-coloured fleece flower, with a tall cluster of golden lace in the background.

This is now a more drought-tolerant perennial bed, replanted in 2012 to “reflect the environmental ethics of today’s gardeners,” comments Antonijevic. “Gardens generally reflect the current mores of society,” she adds.

Before that it was a rose garden, but all the roses were lost in the winter of



Eva Antonijevic, community programs director for the Friends of the Summerland Ornamental Gardens. / JUDIE STEEVES/CONTRIBUTOR

2010-2011 and the decision was made to transition it to experimental water-saving perennials. There was a water savings of 63,000 litres of water in the first year, enough to fill a swimming pool.

Even if you're not willing or able to cut out all your water use on outdoor landscapes, reducing the amount of outside watering is just as important in the dry Okanagan valley, where water is a particularly precious commodity, she believes.

Since Antonijevic started work at the 15-acre ornamental garden four years ago, she has taken steps to reduce water use, except in the innovative 2.5-acre xeriscape garden started by Brian Stretch in 1991. It's still the first and largest xeriscape demonstration garden in the country, she notes with pride.

Efforts have also been made to water more efficiently elsewhere in the gardens. For instance, an irrigation audit led to repairing and raising the sprinkler heads in the turf areas, funded in part through an Okanagan Basin Water Board grant, and resulting in another 29 per cent water saving.

Antonijevic has applied for a separate grant to hire a dedicated xeriscape gardener to continue garden renovations to reduce water needs and the expense of annual beds. When she began at the gardens, 14,000 annuals were planted each spring. That said, there are a wide and colourful variety of drought-tolerant annuals as well, from popular zinnias and portulaca to alyssum, calendula, cosmos, geranium, marigolds, California and Shirley poppies, petunias, sunflowers and nasturtium. And many can be started from seed.

In the coming year, the SOG will feature a selection of plants highlighted at participating local garden centres as part of the Make Water Work Plant Collection, including thrift, lavender, sedum, coreopsis, blanket flower, catnip and thyme. Meanwhile, you can go to the Make Water Work website for details: www.makewaterwork.ca/plants.

Looking for additional inspiration for your yard? Antonijevic recommends the Okanagan Xeriscape Association website (www.okanaganxeriscape.org) which provides valuable tips and advice about conserving water on your landscape, but also a plant database of more than 400 drought-tolerant annuals, perennials, trees, vines and shrubs.

Also, check out the Autumn Garden Tour in Penticton Sept. 19 which includes a number of local xeriscape gardens, with proceeds going to the SOG. For details, go to www.summerlandornamentalgardens.org.

With 24 per cent of all Okanagan water used on household lawns and gardens, and less water available per person than anywhere in Canada, valley residents are encouraged to reduce outdoor water use this summer and fall. Take the pledge to Make Water Work at www.MakeWaterWork.ca.

Take the pledge to:

- Water plants. Not pavement.
- Water between dusk and dawn.

- Leave lawn 5-8 cm (2-3 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.

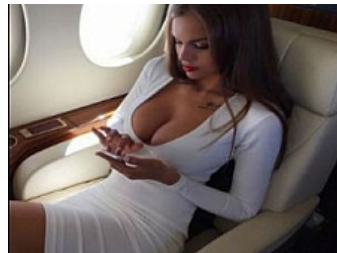
Make Water Work is an initiative of the Okanagan Basin Water Board and its Okanagan WaterWise program.

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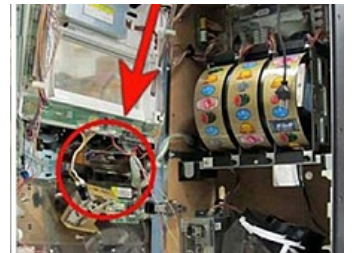
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