



Defensible Landscape

By [Barbarella](#) | Published Thursday, Nov. 8, 2007

"With the fires, we saw just how dry it is," says Marty Eberhardt, executive director for the Water Conservation Garden. "We only get 10 percent of our water locally." At least 85 percent of the water used in San Diego County is imported. "That comes from the Colorado River, which is in an eight-year drought, and from the Sierras, down through the delta -- last winter the Sierras were at their lowest snow-pack in 30 years. And then this judgment on top of it -- even if the weather isn't a problem, we will still have less water." The judgment to which Eberhardt is referring is one made by a federal judge in Fresno on August 31, 2007, which ruled in favor of protecting the threatened delta smelt by reducing the amount of water pumped from the San Francisco Bay--Delta Estuary to Southern California. Small fish were getting sucked into the pumps and dying. According to the San Diego Water Authority, 40 percent of our water currently comes from the bay delta. Pumping reductions commence January 2008.

"Approximately 60 percent of all urban water use in San Diego is for outdoor use," says Jason Foster, director of public affairs for the Water Authority. "Reducing outdoor water use has been a focus of the Water Authority for some time, but the need for it is becoming more acute with the pumping restrictions on the horizon."

According to Foster, the agricultural community will be the first to feel the loss. As of 2008, many farmers will receive 30 percent less water. "They get a discount when there is a surplus, but they are the first in line to take a cut. They're basically serving as a first line of defense [against desert fires in San Diego]." Farmers who lost much of their inventory in the recent fires will not face as severe a water reduction this year as those farmers whose groves and crops were spared.

One approach to reducing outdoor water use, Foster explains, is to "increase the marketability and desirability of water-efficient plants and landscapes." On Saturday, November 10, the Water Conservation Garden will host the California-Friendly Gardening Festival, highlighting water-conservation and fire-prevention landscaping programs.

"Water agencies have been doing a pretty good job getting people to use low-flow toilets, showerheads, and water-conserving washing machines," says Eberhardt, "but now it's time to deal with the really big issue, which is outdoor water use." Keeping a tropical yard does not reduce the risk of fire. "Every plant burns -- there is nothing that won't burn if you have a situation like we just had."

The methods of spacing and irrigation, however, can have a major effect on protecting one's home from flames. "If a shrub is three feet high, you want the bottom of neighboring tree branches to start at nine feet high -- you don't want the fire to leap from one large plant to another large plant," Eberhardt explains. According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, a state law effective since January 2005 requires all homeowners to keep 100 feet of "defensible space" around their structures.

"The whole purpose of our garden is that you hear all this stuff, but here you can come and look at it and get ideas and say, 'I like that' or 'I don't like it,'" says Eberhardt. Most of the garden's landscape is eight years old, which offers people the chance to see how plants they might be considering for their own landscape will mature. This year the festival includes a tour of a new "fire-wise" landscaping exhibit.

"We offer fire-wise landscaping classes," says Eberhardt. "If you're in the wildland-urban interface -- where wildlands and homes intersect, like outside of Jamul -- you need to be particularly careful. Don't have plants up against the house, and don't have anything touching the eaves or roofs -- a lot of people do that."

Eberhardt has a friend who lived in Julian and lost her home in the Cedar Fire. "I think people need to be aware that they are taking huge risks when they live out there." When her friend lost her home, she told Eberhardt that she had known it was a risk and was not surprised. "There's little way that people are going to be totally protected out there," says Eberhardt. "I think the most important things you can do have to do with where your house is situated and the way your house is constructed -- what it's made out of. Shake-shingle roofs, we all know, are dangerous." -- *Barbarella*

California-Friendly Gardening Festival Saturday, November 10 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College 12122 Cuyamaca College Drive
West El Cajon Cost: Free Info: 619-660-0614 or [WWW.thegarden.org](http://www.thegarden.org)