

Water misers have low bills

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By Vicki Vaughan

'Mary Lou and Macon Roemer are water misers.

In August, they used less than half the average number of gallons as did their neighbors, yet their yard is no desert landscape of rocks and cactus.

In the front, two curving paths are set off by a small patch of St. Augustine grass. In the backyard, there's a graceful patio and a lush arbor that provides plenty of shade for their grandchildren's sandbox.

The Roemers, whose house was featured on the 2012 Watersaver Landscape Tour, are among a growing group of homeowners who've found ways to reduce their water use. Their strategies save money and provide a way to maintain a nice-looking landscape during times of drought.

Homeowners who've cut back on water employ common-sense practices, such as starting the clothes washer and dishwasher only for full loads, to taking bolder steps, such as eliminating grass entirely.

Collecting rainwater and xeriscaping with native plants has been a key part of the Roemers' plan. "A lot of times people think of xeriscape as kind of barren," Mary Lou Roemer said. "But our landscape is pretty lush looking."

The Roemers use barrels and storage tanks that can collect about 1,000 gallons of rainwater for most of the landscape. "It doesn't take more than an inch of rain to fill up everything we have," she said.

That collection system "serves the need for our landscaping, but not the lawn," Roemer said. They use city water to nourish the patch of St. Augustine.

"We still have a pretty decent patch of lawn in the backyard," she said. "We have grandbabies, and they like to play and do little somersaults, so we need some grass."

The Roemers could have earned a SAWS rebate of as much as \$400 for their landscape if they had eliminated St. Augustine grass. There are a number of requirements for the rebate, but one is that no more than 50 percent of the landscape can be turf, and it must be Bermuda, buffalo or zoysia varieties only, according to SAWS.

Even with the water-hungry St. Augustine, the Roemers used just 3,700 gallons of water in August. Average usage in their neighborhood was almost 9,000 gallons, according to their monthly bill from the San Antonio Water System.

Another couple, Sylvia and Jim White, have eliminated grass completely.

They do have plants, though, and they use water from their air conditioner's condensate drain to water them. In addition, they have a 75-gallon water catchment system to water plants in their courtyard.

Instead of downspouts, the Whites use rain chains. Rain chains are chain-like links or decorative cups that funnel water into rainwater containers and provide aural and visual interest.

"From the containers, any overflow is piped outside the courtyard where it is discharged at two locations," Jim White said. Indoors, in addition to their Energy Star washing machine and low-flow toilets, the Whites added a programmable water heater. They've set it to heat water only when they need it: 2.6½ hours in the morning and 2.6½ hours in the evening.

"There's a recirculating pump in the unit that makes hot water readily available in the most remote location from the heater, in our case, the kitchen," White said.

Veronica Gard is another homeowner who eliminated grass in her yard. She lived in her house for about two years before she realized, "I didn't want to try to keep grass in the climate we have."

She cut off her sprinkler system about six years ago and then xeriscaped her small yard with the help of landscape designer Brian Hough. Her September bill from SAWS was \$32.97, her highest in nine months.

Homeowners with sprinkler systems should consider not leaving the system on automatic, SAWS conservation director Karen Guz said. They also can cut water use by running the sprinkler system only in an area that looks dry or by hand watering, she said.

Because of Stage Two watering restrictions now in effect, sprinkler systems can be used only during certain times on a homeowner's single assigned day during the week. "In that limited window, home automatic irrigation easily uses the 2,000 gallons of water each week," Guz said.

One longtime water miser, Darby Riley, said homeowners who make the move to a xeriscaped lawn won't regret it. He xeriscaped his yard more than 15 years ago. His September SAWS bill totaled \$27.73.

"I have all native plants in the front yard, all flowering," Riley said. "It's completely abloom right now. I watered to get it started years ago, but I don't water any more.

"When you do this, you get butterflies, bees, hummingbirds right out your window."

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