Moulton Niguel Water District's successful 'NatureScape' turf-to-native-garden program was created, implemented and is managed by Jodie Cook Design, Inc. The program includes a 3 hour workshop, garden design, installation* and irrigation and establishment coaching.
(*All NatureScape gardens are installed by the experts at Tree of Life Nursery.)

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Garden tour shows south Orange County homeowners how to adopt a native alternative

A private home in Dana Point featuring Watershed-friendly, drought-resistant landscaping with a variety of native California plants was one of the stops on the Moulton Niguel Water District's first-ever NatureScape Garden Tour on Saturday, April 13, 2019. (Photo By Jeff Antenore, Contributing Photographer)

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For Laguna Niguel homeowners Luke and Mary Burson, the best way to go green is to go brown.

They've ditched an American standard set for suburbias nationwide — the green front lawn — for mulch chips, white-rock swales, on-trend succulents, and plants native to the area, putting it on display Saturday, April 13 as one of eight homes featured in a garden tour hosted by Moulton Niguel Water District.

The district serves Aliso Viejo, Laguna Niguel, Laguna Hills, Mission Viejo, Dana Point and San Juan Capistrano.

"If the only person who walks on the grass is the guy that mows it, why do you have grass?" Luke Burson said, crediting the philosophical token to a workshop he attended at the water district's office. "And that's when it hit me."

The tour promoted a two-year-old, publicly funded program, NatureScape, which provides residential homeowners with the tools — workshops, discounts, rebates, in-house experts — to retrofit their front lawns into native landscapes.

Since inception, 115 residents have applied for the NatureScape program and 36 gardens have been installed, Medha Patel, the water district's spokeswoman, said.

"By having everyone come out, we want the neighbors to be inspired by seeing the other gardens, learning how these watershed-friendly landscapes cut water consumption, reduce stormwater runoff, reintroduce native species and reduce water bills," Patel said of the event. "We want it to be this rippling effect."

Last month, California — for the first time in seven years — became drought-free, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. On a local scale, Laguna Niguel experienced 17 inches of rain through March 22 — 7 inches more than the city's average rainfall amount, OC Public Works reported, and four times last year's count.

On March 21, the Moulton Niguel Water District board of directors voted to increase the rebate amount for the NatureScape program from $2 to $3 per square foot.

Measuring the average project at about 1,000 square feet, the district's director of finance and water resources, Drew Atwater, estimated the average out-of-pocket expense for homeowners would be about $3,000, post-rebate.

During the "establishment period" — the first two to three years — the garden will consume 60% to 70% less water, Atwater said. When the landscape becomes fully established, homeowners can expect water usage to drop down to 20%, 10% or even zero percent of their previous landscape irrigation, Atwater added.

"Landscapes are not a one-year decision; it's a 10- to-20-year decision," Atwater said. "Our strategy during the drought was to avoid people killing their landscapes, only to have them put it back in after the drought is over."

Back in the Burson's garden, small spurts of sagebrush and sugar bushes contrasted the color of popping coral bells, coastal sunflowers and purple sage, emulating the hiking trails Mary Burson treks. The garden gathers around a centerpiece young Engelmann Oak — a nod to Luke Burson's fishing trips to Cedros Island. A backless bench sits by, marrying the front lawns of two houses into a communal area, accented with wooden plank bridges and rustic hanging rain chains.

The Bursons will be maintaining their three-week-old garden over the next year or two, plucking grass spires and applying herbicides to weeds, as a sustaining root system is established.

Tour attendees Tom Parry and Patty Leavitt from Dana Point visited all five tour stops. The couple are owners of a well-established garden, having made the switch from lawn to self-sustainable garden three years ago.

It was important for Parry and Leavitt to pick their plants with ecosystems in mind, lending their garden to butterflies, caterpillars, hummingbirds and bees.

They've restored a number of native scents unmatched by their former lawn while reducing their water consumption by 60%, Parry said.

"It used to be just mow, blow and go," Leavitt said. "But now, when we went native, we actually sit out there. It's kind of like a park."

But perhaps the greatest motivator for homeowners to go brown may be rooted in their pocketbooks.

That was the case for Roni Litz, a Laguna Niguel homeowner of 38 years, who said the water bill she pays has been cut in half since installing a drought-resistant landscape in November 2018.

She's replaced her $120 monthly lawn maintenance service with a $100 quarterly garden maintenance service.

Insistent on color splashes, she was relieved to find that "drought resistant" didn't translate to a library of cacti. Her fix is met with the desert wishbone bush, yellow sundrops and island pink yarrows.

"Everybody wants to save money," Litz said. "And water is only going to become more expensive."

Of the bigger picture, Luke Burson likened the experience to a return to nature.

"We've taken a place that was pretty special and we covered it in asphalt and concrete. Now we realized that we've overdone that," Burson said. "We're putting back the plants that used to be here, and we're trying to use the water as originally intentioned."

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