

Drought and the garden

The news reports on California's drought are dire. However, the drought did not happen overnight, we are now in our [fourth year of drought](#). Nevertheless, for years my city, [South Pasadena](#), like many others, did not take a proactive role on [water conservation](#). The lushness of South Pasadena is apparent every time one crosses into the city. Designated a [Tree City](#) by the [Arbor Day Foundation](#), we take pride in our tree-lined streets. Unfortunately, we also take pride in our emerald green lawns.

To be fair, South Pas has done more than many cities to encourage water conservation through a [tiered water rate system](#) adopted in 2011. Since that time, despite objections by many, water rates have increased dramatically and heavy users have seen the largest increases. The changes were necessary to encourage conservation but also to insure that there was adequate funding needed to provide water:

Officials said the rate changes were needed so that the city's water fund can be self-sufficient. The fund faces a \$500,000 deficit at the end of the fiscal year in July without the increase, officials said.

The hike is also necessary to meet the city's water debt coverage; to keep its water bonds from going into technical default; and to complete the city's \$60 million reservoir repairs project. ([South Pasadena's water rate model not set in stone, Pasadena Star News, 1/13/2011](#)).

Yet, even with our higher water bills and tiered billing system, we find ourselves in the company of other lush, [water-guzzling cities](#) who will be required to cut water usage by a whopping 35%. This group includes cities whose daily per capita water consumption in September 2014 exceeded 165 gallons: LaCanada (397 gallons), Palos Verdes (271 g), and Beverly Hills (217 g). Alas, South Pas joins the group with a water usage of 166 gallons per person per day. Not only did we barely squeak into this elite group, our city dropped its daily per capita water consumption by 9% from February 2013 to February 2015. This, too, distinguishes us from these other cities who actually saw water consumption either stay the same or increase during this period of drought: LaCanada: 0% change, Palos Verdes: 1% increase, and Beverly Hills: 3% increase.

When Governor Brown's plan was released I was pleased to see that cities using less water per person would not have to reduce water usage as much as those using far more. Cities with the lowest per capita water consumption are mandated to cut 10%, while cities with the highest users must reach for 35%, averaging a 25% cut in residential water consumption statewide. Since residential water use accounts for about 20% of the state's total water use, this will result in a savings of 5%.

Requiring every city beyond an arbitrary cut off to shoulder the same burden - South Pasadena at 166 gallons per person per day, and LaCanada at 397 gallons per person per day must cut water consumption by 35% - does not seem like a fair formula, either. Hopefully this inequity will be addressed, possibly using a formula similar to the tiered billing system. A base amount of water per person could be provided to each city. Water allocations beyond this amount would be cut by appropriate percentages. It is possible that this is the way the new water allocations will be made, though it has not been presented this way in the [media](#).

The buzz in South Pas is all about tearing out the lawn and replacing it with a low water-use garden. The desire to do the right thing is palpable. Unfortunately, there is another significant consideration and that is: the trees. Our city is graced with large, old street and landscape trees. These trees, whether coast live oaks, Engelmann oaks or magnolias, have been growing among our heavily watered lawns. The coast live oaks that pre-date development have generally suffered from the excessive summer irrigation, while other trees, mostly non-natives, can only survive with year around water. We can remove our lawns but if we drastically reduce irrigation, many trees will die. The city will become hotter and energy consumption from air-conditioning will increase. I can attest to how important properly placed trees are to keeping our homes cool. Losing a mature avocado tree on the south side of our house has made the upstairs bedrooms noticeably hotter. We have insulated the walls and put opaque white shades in the windows. We are planning to install awnings as well, but that tree did a whole lot to keep our air-conditioning cost low and our house comfortable. The catch is that [energy production](#) requires water.

Outdoor water conservation efforts should be directed at reducing lawns and high water-use plants while maintaining the urban canopy. In South Pasadena we are seeing many trees that are in decline due to the drought. Homeowners should be instructed on how to remove their lawns without further endangering their trees. The proper use of mulch and infrequent but deep-watering techniques should be encouraged. Rebate programs should support horticultural practices that make sense in our mediterranean climate, especially planting in late fall to winter when less supplemental irrigation will be needed and new plants have the best chance of survival. The current [turf-removal rebate](#) program ends on June 30 and requires immediate replacement of lawns with drought tolerant landscaping. Frankly, it is irresponsible to require homeowners to replant with the hot, dry season upon us. Adding to this the potential damage to trees which could lead to an increase in energy use, accompanied by an increase in water required to produce that energy, one must wonder whether a savings of 5% from reduced irrigation will actually save us any water at all.