

THE WINDSOR TIMES > NEWS

Mark West Chamber plans water wise garden*Garden built with sponsorship by California American Water***by Lynda Hopkins
Staff Writer**

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In front of the Mark West Area Chamber of Commerce, orange California poppies and purple salvia plants bloom. A quiet bench overlooks a lawn that will never require water.

The blossoms and picnic-ready landscape are all part of a showcase project designed to emphasize water conservation and habitat restoration.

“When we found the new Chamber of Commerce building, there was this enormous lawn,” said Kathleen Palmer, one of the project leaders and the editor of the chamber’s newsletter. “We wanted to put in something that was more conscientious and saved water. My focus has previously been more on habitat gardens, and with this garden we have both.”

The water wise landscaping was sponsored by California American Water, and offers an example that local residents might follow.

“The example we want to set is to reduce ornamental lawns in the area,” said Evan Jacobs, External Affairs Manager for California American Water and publicity representative for the chamber.

“If you have a grass lawn and you’re out there with your kids using it, that’s great, and there’s no reason to change it. But if the only time you ever walk on your lawn is to mow it, it’s time to think of doing some kind of alternative landscaping. It can save the customer money and it looks great. That’s why we do these demonstration gardens,” Jacobs said.

California American Water is currently offering a rebate to Larkfield customers who are willing to replace turf grass with water efficient landscaping.

“It’s a great program. We offer up to \$1,000 for a house and up to \$2,500 for commercial properties,” Jacobs said. Customers can call 542-1717 for more information.

Water wise landscaping can offer benefits that go beyond water conservation.

“We went with plants that are part of our natural ecosystem in Sonoma County so that they’re friendly for wildlife and bugs and butterflies and all those other great things,” Jacobs said.

“It brought some beauty and life to the area as well as serving as a demonstration garden for water conservation and habitat plants,” Palmer noted.

And the garden even has grass: The Good Nature Company installed OneLawn, an artificial turf that requires no water.

[Print Page](#)

NATIVE PLANTS — The new garden in front of the Mark West Chamber of Commerce is designed to inspire residents looking to reduce their water consumption. Photo by Lynda Hopkins

"From a distance, it looks just like real grass. It feels great to walk and sit on," Jacobs said.

John Essman and Kathleen Palmer of Sonoma CONNECTION co-led the project. California American Water provided approximately \$5,000 of funding, and Willowside School Nursery provided most of the plants. Aaction Rents, The Good Nature Company, Urban Tree Farm, Aggie Maggio, Pat Morelli, and Molsberrys Market donated time and products as well.

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