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GARDENING: Students dig in at landscape workshops

By Meredith Grenier

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During the recent Ocean Friendly Gardening and Landscape workshop, Pamela Berstler (with hose) and Marilee Kuhlmann (with meter) demonstrated methods used in creating an ocean-friendly and water-wise garden. They were assisted by Grace Farwell of South Bay Environmental Services, left, Gus Meza of West Basin Municipal Water District, middle, and Paul Herzog of the Surfrider Foundation. Photo by Meredith Grenier

Returning students were fired up at the second of two Ocean Friendly Gardening and Landscape workshops earlier this month at the West Basin Municipal Water District office in Carson.

At the first workshop, in August, they had learned hands-on skills to transform their water-guzzling lawns into colorful water-wise gardens. This time around, they couldn't wait to share their success stories.

The buzz was all about steps they had taken to bring change to their home landscapes. Some students were motivated by saving money on water bills, while others wanted to do their bit for the ecology by banishing pesticides and fertilizers - which can find their way into the ocean - and conserving water.

Some called the first workshop inspiring. Others said they were empowered by the clear, concise and often humorous information presented by the two principals of G-3, the Green Gardens Group.

This Mar Vista-based landscape design firm had been retained with grant money from the state of California, through a partnership between the West Basin Municipal Water District and the Surfrider Foundation.

The ongoing workshops not only are informative, but they are free. About 25 similar workshops are planned at locations around the South Bay over the next two years.

During a short recap of the first workshop, Gus Meza, senior water-use efficiency specialist with the West Basin Municipal Water District, explained that landscape conservation isn't

just about planting low-water plants.

"We also want to look at electricity," he said.

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"The highest amount of electricity we use comes from moving water up over the Tehachapi Mountains. So if we use less water, we will use less energy."

Ocean-friendly gardens not only use native plants, but cut water usage through more efficient irrigation systems, rain water retention and by curbing runoff. They also use less energy in the form of mowing and blowing, and they thrive without the use of fertilizers and pesticides once some natural bacteria and fungi are established.

"We look to nature to learn how to steward an ocean-friendly garden," said Marilee Kuhlmann, co-principal of G-3. "The ideal for (ocean-friendly garden) maintenance is to do nothing."

At the August class, Kuhlmann and her G-3 partner, Pamela Berstler, introduced students to general concepts about lawn removal, planting techniques, and water conservation and irrigation, followed by a hands-on planting session in the water district's demonstration garden at the entrance to (and surrounding) its building at 17140 Avalon Blvd.

Students learned how to program a "smart irrigation system," which emits water according to climate information received from a local weather station. Seven at a time, students piled into the irrigation closet to observe Berstler's demonstration, which included showing how to program into the controller details such as soil consistency, a plant's watering needs, ZIP code and sprinkler type - such as rotor, spray or drip.

Meanwhile, outside in the demonstration garden, students checked out plants they had installed the previous month.

Prior to the planting, impacted soil was broken up and samples were analyzed at a lab. To increase microscopic beneficial organisms, certain bacteria and a fungal-rich tea were applied to the soil.

An irrigation system was laid out and plants were grouped by their watering needs in sun, part-sun and shade. A dry creek bed of rocks was added not only for aesthetics but also as a reservoir for runoff rainwater.

Once the garden beds were ready, participants planted a few trees and dozens of California native perennials.

The gardens already are attractive, but in a few months when the new plantings grow in, the gardens will not only be beautiful, but they will be a habitat for birds, insects and wildlife.

One of the last steps was to add mulch to help retain water and cut down drastically on pruning, weeding, watering and green waste.

While inspecting the fruits of their labors during the second workshop, students learned about garden maintenance, which, if the garden is installed properly, should be minimal.

They also learned about irrigation maintenance, such as resetting the controller each month or each quarter as the weather becomes cooler and

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rain irrigation is more plentiful. They also learned how to flush out the lines and clean filters.

If you drive by the front of the West Basin Water District, you will see the plants, which have been in the ground for about six weeks. The gardens are framed by newly planted trees including crape myrtle in several colors and palo verdes with yellow blooms.

Among the plants chosen for the demonstration garden are achillea "Heidi Pink" and "Island Pink"; agave shawii; ceanothus "Yankee Point," "Concha," "Heart's Desire," and "Joyce Coulter"; Dudleya hassei and pulverulenta; Eriogonum grande rubescens and latifolium; festuca "Point Joe" and "Siskiyou Blue"; heuchera maxima; Iris Pacific Coast; and Mahonia "Golden Abundance."

Other plants are Mimulus "Pamela"; Penstemon heterophyllus "Blue Springs" and "Palmeri"; and various salvias such as S. apiana, "Bees Bliss," "Dara's Choice" muelleri and "Pozo Blue."

There is definitely a good case to be made for eliminating lawns. According to Kuhlmann, a low-water landscape saves about 80 percent of the water required for a typical California turf lawn.

Meredith Grenier is a freelance writer. She can be reached at meredithgrenier@yahoo.com.