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Native Plants

How One Neighborhood Saved Millions of Gallons of Water With Native Plants

By installing water-saving appliances and less thirsty native plants, this Colorado community saved 15 million gallons of water in just one year.



By Liz Bergstrom

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After tearing out an old patch of junipers and the surrounding grass, Don Ireland transformed his yard into a colorful garden full of native species that saved water—and money. Photos: Don Ireland

Don Ireland's personal campaign to save water began when he moved to Colorado after years of working as a newspaper reporter. "I'm still curious about how things work," he says. So when he started attending his homeowners association

meetings and learned that more than 40 percent of their budget went to water bills, he decided to dust off his research skills from his reporting days and find out why.

When Ireland moved in, the Cherry Creek Townhomes 3 Homeowners Association in Denver, Colorado was landscaped mostly with turfgrass and juniper bushes surrounded by lava rocks, a popular—not to mention dated—style from the 1960s akin to “all of us wearing leisure suits today or having lava lamps to light our home,” Ireland says. But his complaint was about more than aesthetics. These types of plants need huge amounts of water in a high-plains desert environment like Colorado. Worse, the community’s sprinklers, needed to water the thirsty plants, and other appliances wasted additional water. His final frustration was the single water meter being used by all 250 condos—meaning that all tenants were paying for the entire community’s high water use. Something had to give.

So Ireland did some research into which native plants would do well in the area, and talked to his neighbors to get their support for a community-wide makeover. Later, when he became president of the Cherry Creek Townhomes Homeowners Association, he had a chance to make a big difference for birds and his community.

With the leadership of Don and his wife Lynn, a longtime gardener, Cherry Creek tore out 250 private gardens over a five-year period and replaced them with native flowers and shrubs that require little to no extra watering. They also built a community garden with vegetables and herbs, replaced turfgrass in the strips between parking lots and sidewalks, and installed water-saving sprinkler heads and more than 400 high-efficiency toilets.

The results were dramatic. In 2009, the Cherry Creek 3 Homeowners Association used about 37 million gallons of water a year. By 2014, after the native plant and water efficiency overhaul, their water usage dropped to less than 22 million gallons—saving 15 million gallons a year and earning additional rebates from the water utility company. Ireland says that the neighborhood's swimming pool holds 109,000 gallons of water, so the project's conservation impact is equivalent to saving 138 swimming pools of water every year.

For all the work that they did to reduce the community's water use, the homeowners association has received a [Habitat Hero award](#) from Audubon Rockies, a Water Conservation Award from the Colorado WaterWise nonprofit, and an Environmental Leadership Award from the Colorado state government. In addition, Ireland has attended native plant and climate change advocacy trainings with Audubon Rockies and he speaks to local gardening groups, other homeowners associations, and education groups about the benefits of native plants.

“My wife and I now have a two-year old grandson, and I think about, ‘What will his future be like? Will he have enough water when he’s my age?’ ” Ireland says. “I want to make sure the birds we have—the hummingbirds we have, the butterflies we have—are going to be around for him to see and enjoy.”