



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Rebecca Schoenenberger, owner of California Nativescapes, designed the landscaping of this home on Plaza Drive in the Palm Haven section of Willow Glen, but left the planting and a bit of the redesign to the homeowners. A dry creek is surrounded by chaparral plants such as coyote brush, sage and manzanita.

# Going Native

## It pays to landscape with plants that tolerate dry weather

By MARY GOTTSCHALK

**F**or some it's the shock of the water bill; for some, it's a maintenance issue; and for others, it's just time.

Whatever their personal reasons, a number of San Jose residents are replacing their lawns with native California plants and getting paid for their efforts.

The payment comes from the Santa Clara Valley Water District

Landscape Rebate Program, which pays homeowners and businesses to replace high water use landscaping or to upgrade to high-efficiency irrigation equipment.

For a single-family home, a rebate of up to \$2,000 is possible.

"It's not bad to get a little check now and then for doing something right," says Loui Tucker, who redid the back yard of the Race Street

home she shares with her partner, Sabine Zappe.

"We ripped out the lawn, put in a brick patio, put in two large planter boxes and some we left as dirt," Tucker says of their 2009 project.

"We had an extensive garden this summer with lettuce, tomatoes, eggplant, onions, zucchini, herbs and a strawberry bed. We fed ourselves very well on the produce."

Tucker and Zappe got a check for \$525.68 for their back yard and are now planning to re-landscape their front yard and apply for another rebate.

Tucker says she first heard about the rebate program from a gardener she hired to help install her sprinkler system.

Rebecca Schoenenberger, founder and owner of California

Nativescapes, makes a point of telling clients about the rebates. However, she says that while it's a nice bonus for many, it hasn't been the primary reason they give for redoing their yards.

"The biggest thing I hear is, 'I've got to get my water bill down' or 'I need low maintenance,'" she says, "especially nowadays. People have work, and kids and lawn mainte-

nance drops off the priority list.”

Schoenenberger, who started her company specializing in sustainable native plant landscaping in March 2009, has picked up most of her clients from word of mouth and a laudatory posting on the Willow Glen Neighborhood Association e-mail list.

Emily Harrison, who moved into a home in Willow Glen last July, saw the e-mail about Schoenenberger.

“The yard was not in very good shape, so I knew I was going to replace what was there,” Harrison says.

“Then I put two and two together and thought this is a good time to do it with the rebates from the water district.”

She had the lawns in both her front and back yards taken out in November.

“Rebecca replaced the front lawn with native plants and in the back yard, she did a beautiful design with a dry creek that ambles through and a meadow. I put in a little Shinto shrine and a bench,” Harrison says.

Although most of her water bill was going toward her lawns, she says, “The water bill was less the issue than using water on grass was for me.”

Harrison knows it’s going to take as long as two years for the new landscaping to become sufficiently established so supplemental watering will no longer be necessary.

“There’s not a lot you can see right now except for the mulch in the back yard, but even without the plants grown out, it’s beautiful. It’s very contemplative,” she says.

“Rebecca did a great job for me. When it grows out it’s going to be stunning.”

Harrison isn’t sure what her rebate will be, but had her final inspection on Dec. 29 and expects a check by the end of February.

Kara Sjoblom-Bay and her husband, Stephen Bay, started considering a landscape change in the fall of 2008 and went to Middlebrook Gardens in the Rose Garden area, which also specializes in native plants and landscapes.

Schoenenberger was working there at the time and helped them.

“We worked exclusively with Rebecca. She did the design for us in December or January, and we started putting it in February,” Sjoblom-Bay says.

“It was a fairly small yard. We just had grass and a small hedge, but we weren’t a big fan of watering and it takes a lot of watering to keep it green.

“We hadn’t been watering, and it was sad looking. We knew we wanted a native garden to cut down on the watering and to be able to function on its own without much water within a couple of years.”

Sjoblom-Bay and her husband did all the work themselves and,



Photographs by Loui Tucker

she says, “we saved a ton of money. We went to a wholesale nursery and selected all the plants based on Rebecca’s design.

“We had no idea what we were doing, but the plan she gave us made it really easy.”

Sjoblom-Bay and Bay received a \$1,000 rebate in June 2009.

“It didn’t cover the cost, but

putting it in ourselves turned out to be fun and lot more satisfying.”

Schoenenberger was born and raised in Willow Glen, earning a degree in park management from West Valley College and a B.S. in environmental studies at San Jose State University.

A job at Middlebrook Gardens helped her realize that native

plant landscaping “was a natural fit with my background in parks and knowing wild plants.”

Since launching her own company ([www.calnativescapes.com](http://www.calnativescapes.com)), Schoenenberger says, “I pride myself on trying to keep things very affordable. A native garden doesn’t need to be a high-ticket item.

“If you want to add a pond and

**Loui Tucker redid the back yard of the Race Street home she shares with her partner, Sabine Zappe. The area in the photograph above previously was lawn. The update includes a brick patio and planter boxes where they grow vegetables.**

water features, there’s an extra bump up in price, but I can do a basic yard for \$2,000 to \$3,000.”

Depending on the complexity and preparation required, installation can be done over a weekend and almost always in under a week, she says.

Since native or Mediterranean plants and drip irrigation systems are in line with her designs and are among requirements for a rebate, it’s not difficult to qualify.

What’s important, Schoenenberger says, is that people realize that while a native garden may seem “too scraggly and wild looking” in the beginning, “you can see a lot of growth in six months. Depending on the plant community, they will look full-grown in two to three years.

“The hardest thing is to get people to think about native gardens now, rather than the traditional planting time of spring,” she says. “Now is the time to get a jump on it and take advantage of the winter rain.”

(See page 18 for rebate details)

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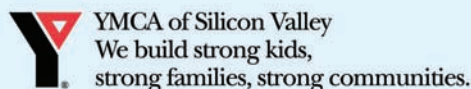
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Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Rebecca Schoenenberger planted wooded and beach strawberry plants and lilac verberna to fill in the space around this palm tree on Plaza Drive in the Palm Haven section of Willow Glen.

## Water district offers rebate for water-wise landscaping

The Santa Clara Valley Water District's Landscape Rebate Program offers homeowners up to \$2,000 to replace plantings that use a lot of water, particularly lawns, with plants requiring a minimum amount of water.

More than 700 homeowners have taken advantage of the program since its inception, says Jerry De La Piedra, program administrator in the district's water-use efficiency unit.

"The first year only a handful participated, but each year it increases. We're on pace to do 400 to 500 this year," he says of the fiscal year ending in June.

Rebates average between \$1,500 and \$2,000, De La Piedra says. "The maximum is \$2,000, and most people come close or to the maximum."

The process is straightforward, but to qualify for the rebate, all steps must be followed.

For single- or multi-family homes with less than 5,000 square feet of irrigated landscape, a pre-inspection survey is required. San Jose Water Company customers should call 408.279.7900 to schedule an appointment. Others should call 800.548.1882.

Once the survey is completed and eligibility is determined, homeowners then contact Electric and Gas Industries Associates at 866.970.7348 to obtain the landscape rebate program application package.

The package lists accepted plants, many of them California natives or Mediterranean plants, as well as detailing all the require-

ments.

The work must be done within 90 days, and all receipts must be saved and copied to complete the application.

Once that is done, a follow-up survey is done and six to eight weeks later, the check arrives.

De La Piedra couldn't specify how much is still available in this

*'The maximum is \$2,000, and most people come close or to the maximum'*

—Jerry De La Piedra

year's budget.

He did say that many applicants don't follow through, either on the work or the paperwork. Money distributions are on a first-come, first-served basis.

Rebate programs are also available for homes with more than 5,000 feet of irrigated landscape with rebates of up to \$20,000 and for businesses with rebates of \$20,000 to \$30,000.

For additional information visit [www.valleywater.org/programs/rebates.aspx](http://www.valleywater.org/programs/rebates.aspx).

—Mary Gottschalk



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