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# Home Garden

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



# **5** WATER CONSERVATION

Steps for saving amid drought conditions



# 12 LIGHTING

Design tips for illuminating interior spaces



**18 FLORA** Adding a hardy burst of color to the garden

# Los Altos Town Crier

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COVER PHOTO: Los Altos residents Ron and Marilyn Labetich have taken steps to conserve water in their yard, including using a pre-timed irrigation system in their extensive vegetable garden.

PHOTO BY S.M. LIEU | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

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#### WATER CONSERVATION

# Water-Wise Ways

Ron Labetich, who grows a wide variety of tomatoes, has taken steps over the years to reduce water use in his Los Altos home and garden. PHOTO BY S.M. LIEU | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

# Lawn-be-gone steps help reduce consumption

#### BY ZOE MORGAN

Staff Writer | zoem@latc.com

Vicki Moore removed the first slice of lawn in her Los Altos backyard around 15 years ago and then, bit by bit, kept replacing pieces until eventually all the grass was gone.

"Over the years we reduced it, and reduced it, and reduced it to the point where there is no lawn anymore," she said. "We relandscaped with a lot of other features, so it includes a mix of native plants and some edible plants."

Nixing your lawn like Moore did is one of the steps residents can take to reduce their water use as California experiences an unprecedented drought, said Gary Kremen, a member of the Santa Clara Valley Water District Board of Directors. Valley Water's board in June enacted a 15% mandatory water-use reduction for Santa Clara County compared to 2019.

"This drought is extraordinarily serious," Kremen said. "This is the worst two years we've ever had in recorded California history."

Within Santa Clara County, 55% of water is used residentially, roughly half indoors and half outdoors, according to data Kremen shared. That means the actions of individuals can make a difference, he added.

Los Altos resident Ron Labetich is among those who have taken steps to reduce his water consumption, including removing parts of his lawn and putting his yard and extensive vegetable garden on a pre-timed irrigation system.

Labetich and his wife, Marilyn, purchased their home 50 years ago and since have experienced the repeated droughts in the region, including a serious one in the late 1970s that impacted how Labetich views water use.

"I tell you, it was horrible. Horrible," Labetich said. "As we've had more droughts, you start thinking about it – what makes it more (water) efficient and easier?"

In recent years, Labetich has been removing his lawn in phases, similar to Moore. That included ripping >>



Los Altos resident Vicki Moore focuses on growing drought-tolerant native plants in her yard. PHOTO BY VICKI MOORE | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

out the grass around a group of four redwood trees he planted decades ago and relandscaping with mulch and largely drought-tolerant native plants. Labetich said he made the decision partly to conserve water, as well as to avoid lawn maintenance and support the redwood trees, which prefer mulch because it helps retain moisture.

He also has installed an irrigation system in his yard, which allows him to control the timing and volume of water used. Other steps he's taken include checking his property for water leaks, changing to low-flow shower heads and taking shorter showers.

"Without water, there's no life," Labetich said. "To me, it's one of the most important things. Without it, we don't have any of this. So, I think it should be a duty of everybody to be economical with water."

#### **GRADUAL REDUCTION**

Moore similarly said she believes people need to be very careful about their water use. She has a long history of environmental work, including founding Living Classroom, a nonprofit that teaches hands-on garden-based lessons in local schools.

In her own life, Moore has taken steps to reduce her family's water consumption. The removal of the lawn in her backyard took place in three stages. First, she removed the grass around an oak tree about 15 years ago. Next, she took out a much larger swath, leaving enough grass to fit a badminton net. Finally, around seven years ago, Moore took out all of the remaining lawn in the backyard.

The front yard was already free of grass. Moore and her family bought their property in 2000 and built a new house on the land in 2002 without any front lawn.

"From the get-go I said, 'I don't have any need for a front lawn," she said. "Even though it was over 20 years ago, I just knew at that point – What's the point? We're not going to use it and I don't want to mow it."

Instead, the front yard is landscaped primarily with drought-tolerant native plants, save for a magnolia tree that was already on the property. Moore >



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WITHOUT WATER, THERE'S NO LIFE. To me, it's one of the most important things. Without it, we don't have any of this. So, I think it should be a duty of everybody to be economical with water.

~ RON LABETICH



Marilyn Labetich, above left, harvests green beans from her garden, which also includes zucchini plants, below left, and tomatoes, above. PHOTOS BY S.M. LIEU | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

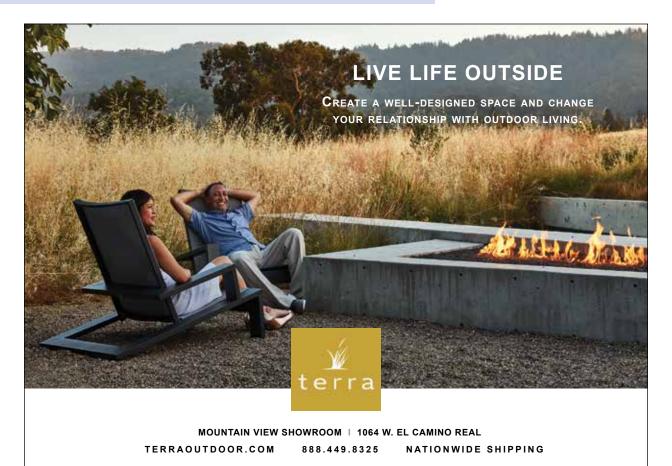
said she's always been a proponent of landscaping that is not only suitable from a water perspective, but also provides habitat for pollinators and other wildlife. Oftentimes, Moore said she sees front lawns that are simply ornamental.

"They're not used, nobody ever walks on it, you have to water it, you have to mow it, you have to fertilize it," she said. "It's just there because (the) perspective is, 'Oh, that's what front lawns should look like."

Moore stressed she doesn't think all lawns are bad, adding that they can be appropriate for households that will actively use the space, such as those with young kids. Although Moore's family decided to forgo grass in the front yard, they kept grass in the backyard until her kids got older.

"We did have a sizable lawn originally for our kids, because they were quite young," she said. "And then over time it got nibbled away."

Beyond the lawn, Moore also filled in their pool about a year ago >



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Using drought-tolerant native plants is one way to reduce water use in the garden. PHOTO BY VICKI MOORE | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

and is currently in the process of building an accessory dwelling unit in that space, which she will rent out. Inside her own house, Moore's washer and dryer recently gave out and she's replacing them with more water-efficient models. She also keeps a bucket in the shower to capture extra water and minimizes toilet flushes.

"Just trying to conserve in all of those basic ways," she said. "It does make a difference."

#### **CONSERVATION TIPS**

Local water experts offered a variety of tips for residents looking to save water during the drought.

According to Kremen, taking such steps is important because the water situation is particularly dire right now. In addition to low rainfall, state and federal water allocations for Santa Clara County also have been cut, and Anderson Reservoir is out of commission while it's seismically retrofitted, he said.

"It's going to be very grim and dangerous if we don't have a very wet winter," Kremen said. Below are steps from Valley Water that individuals can take to conserve both inside and outside their home.

#### INSIDE

- Install high-efficiency toilets.
- Fix leaks.
- Fill the bathtub at most halfway.
- Install aerators.
- Take shorter showers.
- Turn off water while brushing teeth or shaving.
- Wash full loads of clothes and dishes.
- Recycle indoor water to irrigate the garden.

#### OUTSIDE

- Use plants and trees that require less water.
- Install drip irrigation with a smart controller.
- Use a broom to clean outside.
- Set lawn mower blades to 3 inches.
- Adjust sprinkler heads and fix leaks.
- Use mulch.

For more information on conserving water, visit watersavings.org.

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REJUVENATE A SPACE WITH BETTER – AND BRIGHTER – FIXTURES

**BY CELESTE RANDOLPH** 



A year and a half into the pandemic, we've learned a lot. One of the brightest takeaways? The importance of great lighting.

Whether it's a Zoom call, study session or family dinner, the right light fixtures will make your space shine – literally.

In my July column, I shared a favorite design trick: using mirrors to take advantage of natural light in your home. Strategically placed light fixtures provide another stylish solution to dark spaces.

#### DESIGN FOR FLEXIBILITY

Swapping out light fixtures is an easy and impactful way to update

any space. One of my clients wanted a fresh, expansive feel in a small kitchen, so we switched out dated light fixtures for modern gold wall sconces in an all-white space.

In an apartment or rental, you may be limited in your ability to hardwire lighting. Plug-in and corded lighting is popular for this reason, resulting in a wide variety of options. Showing off a beautiful cord is not only acceptable, but also encouraged – and customizable.

Task lighting is vital for work spaces, and now you can choose from far more than a standard desk lamp. A cozy armchair or functional desk space calls for lighting that is both practical and stylish. Try a swing-arm desk lamp for a workspace, or a wallmounted reading light at your bedside or in your favorite reading corner.

Light fixtures are a low-risk way to try out trends. If you need a refresh, simply switch out a shade or change bulbs for a different glow.

#### VARIETY IS EVERYTHING

You can choose from more options than ever before when it comes to lighting your home. I love a nontraditional chandelier with globes and a brass finish, or a swinging bar with downlights.

Table lamps for bedroom nightstands now sometimes include >>

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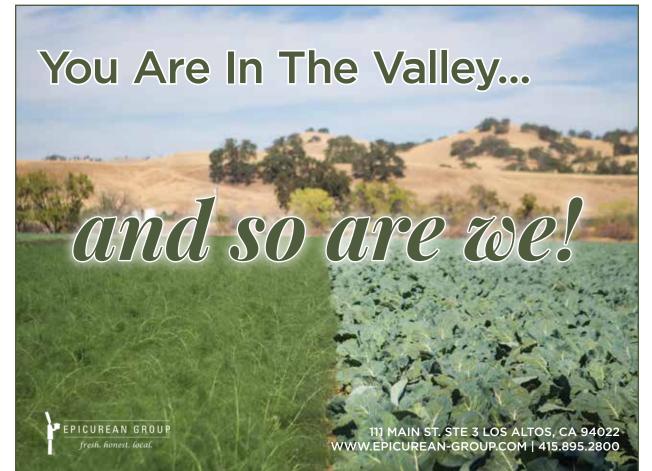
Some floor lamps have multiple arms you can arrange in any formation and change with ease.

Flush-mount lighting and sconces are back, and with more options than ever. They take up almost no space, but they add major impact. Hang sconces vertically or horizontally, depending on the layout of the room and the spaces that need the most light. In one of my clients' bathrooms, we used a playful patterned wallpaper complemented by two wall sconces, one on either side of the mirror over the sink. The sconces have clear glass globes and a finish to match the faucets, and their simplicity is a perfect interplay with fun wallpaper and blue cabinets.

#### MAKE IT PERSONAL

As always, your lighting design should reflect your sense of style. For a streamlined look, you can coordinate light fixtures with your existing furniture, artwork or finishes. Or opt for contrast, mixing modern furniture with soft shades or pairing a more traditional look with sculptural lamps. >

Wall sconces take up almost no space but can add major impact to a room. PHOTO BY LAUREN EDITH ANDERSEN | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER









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Each room is its own stage for lighting design. Walk through each room and think about the mood you'd like to set in the space. You may opt for a gentler, shaded bulb in a bedroom, overhead lighting in the kitchen and a more avant-garde piece in the living room or entryway. A comfortable, well-loved sofa gets a modern update with a geometric floor lamp.

Whatever fixtures you choose, enjoy the flexibility and variety they provide in your home – as well as the gorgeous light they bring to each room. 880

> Celeste Randolph is an interior designer in Los Altos. For more information, visit celesterandolphdesigns.com.

Lighting should reflect an individual's sense of style and can differ based on the room, utilizing various fixtures depending on the space. PHOTOS BY LAUREN EDITH ANDERSEN | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER





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# NATIVE 'PLANTS Monkeyflower Magic

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#### BY TANYA KUCAK

If you drive or cycle in the hills west of town in spring or summer, you may notice light-orange flowering shrubs covering steep, dry hillsides, often in part shade. These shrubs are native, drought-tolerant, longblooming, deer-resistant, attractive to hummingbirds and adaptable to gardens.

The shrubby, longer-lived monkeyflowers that grow on hillsides are called sticky monkeyflowers. The flowers, 1-3 inches across, range from soft orange to apricot to buff. At 2-3 feet high and wide, they are subshrubs or perennials. The brittle stems may dry out if the summer is especially hot, and the plant benefits from light shaping. As with most natives, be careful not to cut back into old wood.

Since at least the 1940s, hybridizers have been working to expand the color palette, flowering time and garden adaptability of monkeyflowers. Bush monkeyflowers, also known as Mimulus hybrids, come in a range of warm colors – yellows, oranges, reds, pinks – as well as whites and creams. They can be smaller than sticky monkeyflowers, 1-3 feet tall and wide. The Jelly Bean series of cultivars has intense colors, and the Fiesta Marigold cultivar's stunning flowers are deep red edged with orange. Some can bloom almost year-round, though they bloom most profusely from spring to summer.

The versatile Mimulus hybrids can grow in sun to part shade, and often do better with some afternoon shade. Their water requirements are similar to other native perennials: They bloom >>



Seep monkeyflower, top, is an ideal pondside plant. It requires a moist location and attracts hummingbirds. Monkeyflowers, above, are native and drought-tolerant. PHOTOS BY TANYA KUCAK | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

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Monkeyflowers bloom in a wide variety of colors, including burgundy, above. PHOTO BY TANYA KUCAK | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

more and look better with occasional summer water once established.

#### **PLANTING TIPS**

Plant monkeyflowers in drifts with native sages and buckwheats, bunchgrasses, coyote mint and hummingbird fuchsia. Freely flowering monkeyflowers look great in containers, too.

Because the flowers occur on the branch tips, prune Mimulus hybrids back to 1 foot in March, before the flush of spring bloom, to get a bushier plant.

Practically the only downside of growing Mimulus hybrids is their relatively short life, typically two to five  $\geq$ 

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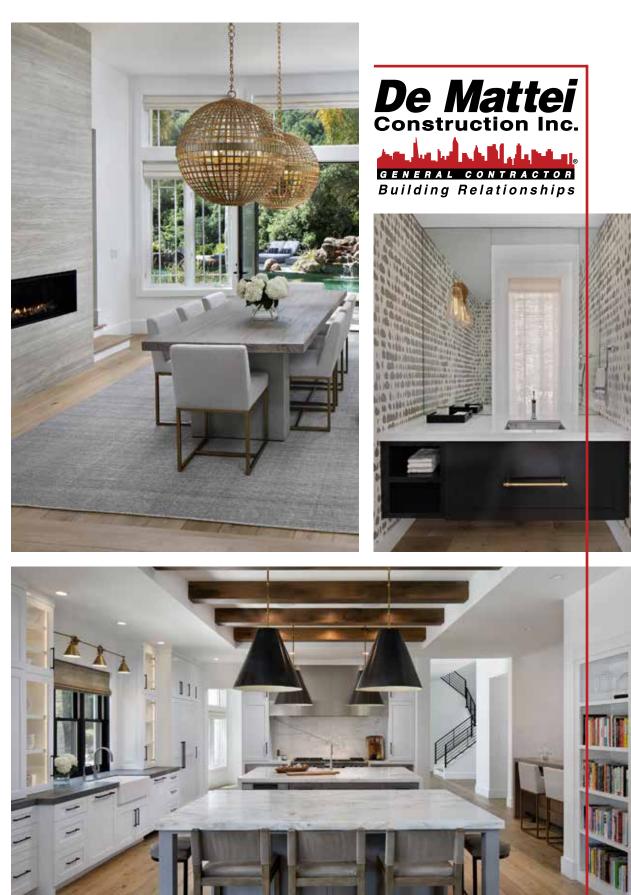
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This plant was purchased as an unlabeled hybrid, but it looks like Jelly Bean Dark Pink monkeyflower, with a white-edged dark-pink flower that fades with age. PHOTO BY TANYA KUCAK | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

years. Like other natives, they may live longer if summer water is more restricted. If you find a color you especially like, you can take cuttings, because they are easy to propagate. The other locally native monkeyflower is on the other end of the watering spectrum. Seep monkeyflower (*Erythranthe guttata*) likes to grow in wet, sunny areas. You've certainly seen it if you've gone hiking along streams anywhere in California. Plant it at the edge of a pond or next to a water fountain. It can get 1-3 feet high and wide. It reseeds, but it's easy to pull if it outgrows its allotted space. The bright-yellow flowers with red markings attract hummingbirds from midspring to midsummer.

Seep monkeyflower and other varieties also occur in hundreds of labs, where they are used extensively in evolutionary and ecological studies, under their former botanical name, Mimulus.

Tanya Kucak gardens organically. Email her at tanya.garden@gmail.com.

# Miramonte<br/>Veterinary HospitalImage: State of the second second



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