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Water-Wise Landscape Transformation Wins Otay's 2026 Contest

Spring Valley, CA — Spring Valley residents Michael Gardner and Karen Clingerman have earned the Otay Water District's "Best in District" honor in the 2026 WaterSmart Landscape Contest for transforming their property into a thoughtfully designed, water-wise landscape. Improvements to their front, side, and back yards have reduced the couple's overall water use by approximately 31%.

Their once high-maintenance yard—marked by thirsty plants, deteriorating hardscape, and bare patches of dirt—is now a beautiful, water-efficient outdoor space that attracts butterflies and hummingbirds and draws admiration from neighbors.

When the couple purchased their home in 2004, the property presented numerous landscaping challenges. More than 40 rose bushes covered a steep front-yard slope and were irrigated by traditional rotating sprinkler heads. Redwood mulch regularly washed onto the sidewalk, and the force of the sprinklers damaged the rose blooms. As tending the roses on the slope became increasingly difficult, the landscape gradually gave way to bare hillsides, invasive weeds, and overgrown shrubs.

In the backyard, a once-lush lawn required significant irrigation, while the invasive roots of a large ash tree lifted the brick patio and eventually damaged the home's sewer line. During the 2015 drought, the couple stopped irrigating the lawn, leaving the yard dry and unusable. Gophers moved in, aging plants struggled to survive, and uneven bricks made the patio unsafe.

In 2024, the couple began working with landscape designer Emiliana V. Emery, owner of Gardens of E.V.E., to create a landscape featuring drought-tolerant, rabbit-resistant, low-water native shrubs, trees, and groundcovers. Flowering plants attract butterflies and hummingbirds, while a dry riverbed, low retaining walls, raised vegetable beds, and extensive hardscape improvements add beauty and functionality throughout the property.

"In working with clients, I believe it is important to recognize the original inhabitants of this region, the Kumeyaay, who continue to live, teach, and thrive in their unceded homelands alongside our oldest relatives: the plants," said Emery. "Working with Michael and Karen was especially rewarding because we shared a similar vision for the landscape. They were mindful of local water resources and wanted to retain as much water on-site as possible."

The couple drew inspiration from several water-wise gardening resources, including the Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College, the California Native Plant Society's Calscape, the San Diego County Water Authority's Nifty 50 plant list, the WaterWise Garden Planner for Southern California, Gardenia Creating Gardens, and the UC Davis Arboretum.

Today, four interconnected 60-gallon rain barrels capture roof runoff for supplemental irrigation. A Wi-Fi-enabled smart controller manages the drip lines and emitters that irrigate the landscape. Removable

mesh cages protect the raised vegetable beds, allowing the homeowners to grow seasonal vegetables while minimizing wildlife damage.

The landscape is located in the District's division 3, which is represented by Board Member Gary Croucher.

"The winners have put thoughtful effort into creating a beautiful, waterwise and functional outdoor space that works for their family," said Croucher. "Their yard is a great example of how residents can make meaningful changes that support water conservation and adapt to California's changing climate without sacrificing beauty. We appreciate them sharing their home and accomplishments with our community and look forward to watching their landscape continue to flourish."

The District recognized Gardner and Clingerman at its October board meeting, where the couple received a gift certificate to a local nursery and other prizes.

For more information about the contest winners, visit otaywater.gov/landscape-contest-winner-2026.

The Otay Water District is a public agency providing water, recycled water, and sewer service to approximately 241,503 customers within approximately 125 square miles of southeastern San Diego County, including the communities of eastern Chula Vista, Bonita, Jamul, Spring Valley, Rancho San Diego, unincorporated areas of El Cajon and La Mesa, and east Otay Mesa along the international border with Mexico. For more information about the Otay Water District, visit otaywater.gov.

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