

Kyle couple uses native plants to blooming glory

Water conservation brings wealth of plants

BY KATE HARRINGTON
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KYLE—Ivan and Sheila Talley's house in the Hometown Kyle subdivision looks at first glance like many others along their street.

The neat brick front gives few clues about the owners, nor does it set the house apart from the other Pulte-built homes clustered around the cul-de-sac.

But walk through the Talley's house to their backyard, and it's a whole different story.

Instead of the usual spread of St. Augustine grass and a sprinkler, the Talleys' lawn boasts islands of native trees and plants, a rainwater conservation system with a myriad of birds and butterflies hovering among the flora.

The Talleys are part of a new wave of homeowners using conservation in their lawn care as an alternative approach to weed killers, high water bills and plants that wither in the Texas sun. They aren't stopping with their backyard, though. Ivan Talley said he hopes to spread conservation awareness among city officials and other residents in Kyle.

"It doesn't make sense to have lots of grass in this climate," Talley said, explaining how he began his green gardening

techniques. "I know not everybody would be into doing something like this, but even a little would make a difference. I've read this corridor is one of the top areas for retirees to move to, and that means a bigger population and more water use."

Austin, where the Talleys lived before moving to Kyle, offers rebates for homeowners who use certain measures in lawn maintenance like rainwater collection, organic fertilizers and native plants. The city also offers breaks for rainwater collec-

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Water conservationist

tion barrels, which can run as high as \$95.

Kyle doesn't have the same kind of program in place. But city councilmembers already have taken a preliminary look at an ordinance requiring people to use more native grasses in an effort to curb water consumption.

The ordinance would discourage the

use of the traditional St. Augustine grass, which requires much watering and doesn't adapt well to high heat and direct sun.

Talley said using rainwater has not only cut his water bill, but made the plants in his yard perk up better than tap water ever did. His rainwater collector, a barrel that sports a spigot and hose attachment, sits tucked alongside the house where the gutter can dump rain directly into it.

"The water in that barrel lasted in between the last big rains we had, some 30 days," Talley said. "And that's not just for the lawn. That's for all the plants, too."

The Talleys also are one of many families beginning to use home-made compost to fertilize their lawn.

Larger cities like Austin encourage homeowners to cut back on chemical-laden fertilizers and learn to recognize insects that are beneficial to plants. Chemicals from pesticides and fertilizers contribute to high pollution rates, Austin officials say, which can lead to serious consequences.

"We find nitrate levels in our creeks and springs can be up to seven or eight times higher in developed areas where people are maintaining lawns," said Kathy Shay, a water quality education manager for Austin.

Shay said big box stores and development don't contribute dangerous chemicals



Ivan and Sheila Talley's house in Hometown Kyle is a sample of the new wave of homeowners using conservation in their lawn care. (photo by Kate Harrington)

to the water system the way homeowners do.

Brian Noble, a scientist with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's (TCEQ) pollution prevention and industry assistance team, said he has found many nationwide studies indicating that improperly applied lawn pesticides are often related to higher cancer rates in children.

"People don't read the instructions and don't put down the correct amount," Noble said. "(The pesticides) are water soluble and don't get absorbed, but washed off. There are a lot of related cancer incidents, especially in kids, because you spray the yard and the kids are the ones playing in it. One of our missions is to get people to use more compost."