

Tampa Bay Times

Does your water-stingy garden deserve a Water-Wise trophy?

By Penny Carnathan, Times Correspondent

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Patricia Harvey-Maines of Holiday won her gardening Oscar in 2007.

"It's taking a very proud place in my garden," she says of the mosaic stepping-stone trophy. "But I'm not stepping on it. It's a showpiece."

Beth and Mike Eisenfeld of Hyde Park in Tampa won theirs in 2008.

"I'd put it out front, but I don't want it to get stolen," Beth says. "It's in my back yard . . . Everyone who comes to my house sees it because they all go out there."



Water-Wise Award winners treasure their trophies, and for good reason. The annual competition pits them against some of the most dedicated gardeners in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties. The stepping-stones, custom-crafted by Peggy Fuhler Designs of Palm Harbor, tell the world these gardeners excel at the daunting challenge of creating a beautiful landscape under trying conditions while conserving water in every way possible.

Sandy Neither of Pasco County is in the running for the first time.

"I'll be chewing my nails until it's over," she confides on her blog.

It's not too late to join her. The deadline for the 15th annual Community Water-Wise Awards is June 30. Applying is free and takes only a few minutes online at tampabaywaterwise.org. A team of judges will visit in July, and you don't even have to be home (but they'd love to have you there). Awards go to winners in each of

the three counties, plus Tampa, St. Petersburg and New Port Richey, and in multiple categories: residents, multifamily properties, schools, businesses, builders.

"I was screaming like a little girl when they told me I won," says Susan Rohr, who displays her 2012 award on a baker's rack next to the front door of her Historic Kenwood home in St. Petersburg. "There was a big ceremony at Sunken Gardens and Mayor Foster presented it to me."

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Passers-by who slow to gawk at the color explosion surrounding Susan and Jeremiah Rohr's bungalow likely have no clue that the stingiest of water misers live here. They see only a lush landscape of giant bromeliads with golden-yellow strappy leaves; violet Mexican petunias; deep pink, white and sunset-colored blossoms on 18 plumeria trees; hot-red succulents; angel's trumpets; blue and white plumbagos; the vibrant greens of foxtail ferns.

Susan's garden demonstrates the importance of finding the right plant for the right place, says Chris Claus, water conservation coordinator for St. Petersburg's Water Resources Department and a Water-Wise judge since 1999.

That's not always as easy as it sounds. Sun blasts the west side of the Rohrs' front yard like a furnace. Shade bathes the east side. The sidewalk leading to the front door goes right up the middle and she wanted identical plants lining both sides.

Despite more than three decades of gardening experience, Susan didn't know where to begin when she and Jeremiah moved here six years ago. They'd bought a neglected mess of a yard, and they'd just arrived from Colorado.

"It was like being on a new planet," Susan says. "All the plants here were brand-new to me."

She asked around, collected cuttings, giveaways and discarded plants. She learned so quickly, she soon launched a business, Home & Garden Solutions Inc. Tending her clients' landscaping brought her more cuttings and volunteers, and she's not shy about knocking on a door when she sees a hot-looking stranger.

Which is how she finally resolved that tricky front walkway problem.

She'd already killed a few plants there when she drove past a home with an intriguing hedge. No one answered the door, so she left a note: What IS that plant?

Natal plum, or *Carissa macrocarpa*, has deep green, roundish leaves and thrives in full sun or part shade. It's a nicely dense shrub that can grow more than 6 feet tall and produces sweet-smelling flowers — and edible fruits. Downside? It's thorny!

That doesn't bother Susan, who's thrilled to have finally found a plant with the look and fortitude to meet her needs.

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If you've faced down similar challenges; if your yard looks like you water daily, but you don't; and if you limit your turf, mulch your beds and choose Florida-friendly and native plants, you should apply for your own gardening Oscar.

"It's a neat opportunity," says 2005 Hillsborough County award-winner Lynn Barber, who went on to become a county Extension agent and Water-Wise judge.

"Even if you don't win, you get a team of skilled water conservation experts looking at your yard and telling you, 'Here's the pros, here's what you can fix.' "

And if you do win?

It feels darned good to be recognized for making a difference.

"I'm proud of the work we've done," says Tampa's Beth Eisenfeld. "I'm proud of being ecologically conscious. I want to do as little damage to the world as possible, and my little postage stamp of a yard does that."

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this column. Penny Carnathan can be reached at pcarnathan49@gmail.com; find her on Facebook at Diggin Florida Dirt. Follow @DigginPenny on Twitter.

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Succulents provide a colorful solution in a part of Susan’s garden that gets intense afternoon sun. In the foreground are flapjacks (*Kalanchoe thyrsiflora*), left, and lavender scallops (*Kalanchoe fedtschenkoi*).



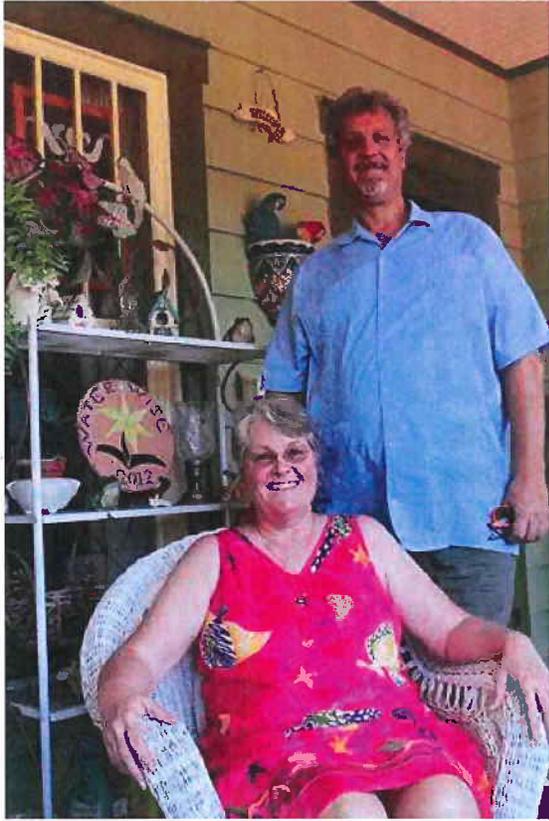
Fragrant plumeria add to the beauty of drought-tolerant color in Susan’s yard. Plumeria, also called frangipani, are easy to start from cuttings.



Susan Rohr peeks into the central cup of a bromeliad to see if it has water. The bromeliad's long leaves act as gutters, funneling water to the central cup, where it nourishes both plants and wildlife.



A pile of discarded vintage roof tiles became a beautiful border for Susan Rohr's front and side yards. The tiles prevent soil and water from spilling onto the sidewalk, and allowed her to build up about 4 inches of mulch in her beds. Terracing — creating different levels in your garden — is a smart water conservation tactic, says Water-Wise judge Chris Claus.



Susan and Jeremiah Rohr spend lots of time on their front porch, where they enjoy watching motorists pause or stop to admire their garden. Transforming their yard included removing all of the weedy turf by covering it with truckloads of free mulch obtained from the city. "We finally got to sell the lawn mower this year," Jeremiah says. Photos by Penny Carnathan | Special to the Times