

# COMMUNITYMANAGER

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## Growing Reason

Informed boards and homeowners can be a manager's best allies when creating well-considered—and award-winning—landscaping.

BY JULIE WARREN

**T**he common areas in the Ironwood Community Association, a large-scale master association in Palm Desert, Calif., were showing their age nearly a decade ago. The landscaping, including trees, annuals, and grass, on the community's medians and the areas around the gated entrances all required a lot of irrigation. Meanwhile, the original irrigation systems in Ironwood, which were built in the early 1970s, often watered more pavement than turf.

Fortunately, Ironwood's board had vision, according to Rob Parker, landscape designer and principal at RGA Landscape Architects also in Palm Desert. He also credits Ironwood's

management with communicating clearly and often to board members and homeowners about what was going to happen and when.

After years of planning and gradually replacing nearly 50,000 square feet of the master association's common area green spaces with native, drought-tolerant plants, Ironwood was awarded the Coachella Valley Water District's (CVWD) "Outstanding Commercial Water Saver" distinction in 2016.

The community's landscape redesign project is expected to save about 2.8 million gallons of water annually, according to a report on the CVWD website. »

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**SHOW AND TELL**

Because desert landscaping can be a new concept for some people, FirstService Residential’s Daniel Farrar, CMCA, general manager of Ironwood’s master association, felt strongly about providing small test areas that residents could see before launching into a large, community-wide project. “We had to show them that (it) can be very beautiful,” he says.

Ironwood started with a “small, high-profile” area that was clearly visible as residents drove into the community; RGA redesigned the landscaping in one of the medians when the paved roadways around it were being replaced several years ago.

“We did it off season so (residents) weren’t disrupted by the construction work,” Parker says. “When people came back for the season and it was done, we got a lot of (positive) feedback.”

“We had several town hall meetings and met with each of the 13 sub-associations,” says Farrar, who regularly provided homeowners with project updates.

Once Ironwood homeowners and board members liked what they saw and realized the potential for saving money on water bills and reducing long-term maintenance costs, the board decided to replace more of the community’s common-area turf.

**WISE MANAGERS**

When Laguna de la Paz, another large-scale Palm Desert-area association, proposed removing about 3 feet of turf adjacent to the pony walls (low walls separating private yards from



common areas) throughout the community, on-site manager Ellen Kahhan, CMCA, AMS—like Farrar—recognized homeowners’ concerns.

“We had renderings done and put on easels in the office so (they) could see what (it) was going to look like when it was done,” says Kahhan, a manager with Associa – Desert Resort Management, AAMC. “This assured people that we were maintaining a good deal of the greenbelt.”

Also like Farrar, Kahhan held town hall meetings to inform residents. She

recommends that a community’s landscape experts be on hand at such meetings. “People can come and ask all of their questions,” she says.

Ultimately, Laguna de la Paz repositioned some of its trees so they were more visible, replaced 5,600 square feet of turf with more drought-tolerant plant materials, and updated its irrigation system to save water.

Kahhan also says it’s critical to have a reputable landscape business partner you trust. Laguna de la Paz’s contractor, Conserve LandCare, received first place

**CAI RESOURCES FOR LANDSCAPING ALTERNATIVES**

CAI has a number of resources for managers and boards looking to conserve natural resources, as well as save money, by replacing traditional landscaping with low-maintenance, drought-resistant, and native plants. Look for *Lawn Gone: Low-Maintenance, Sustainable, Attractive Alternatives for Your Yard*, available at [www.caionline.org/shop](http://www.caionline.org/shop). Member price: \$14.95.

Also, visit [www.caionline.org/learningcenter](http://www.caionline.org/learningcenter) to subscribe to on-demand webinars like “Going Green to Reduce Maintenance Fees” and “Xeriscaping Your Grounds: Saving Time, Money, and Natural Resources.” Member price for a 120-day subscription is \$69.

*Best Practices: Green Communities*, produced by the Foundation for Community Association Research, is another comprehensive guide for conserving water and other resources while updating a community’s curb appeal. This 81-page publication is available as a free, downloadable PDF or as a bound copy at [www.caionline.org/shop](http://www.caionline.org/shop). Member price: \$12.95

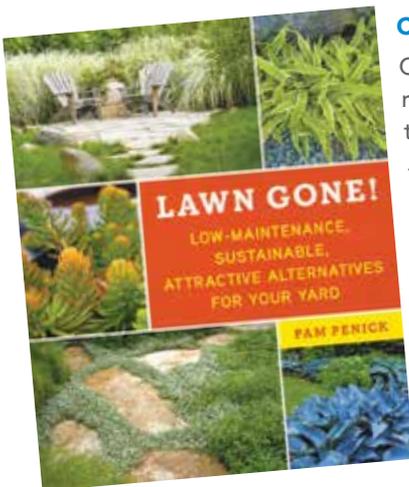


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**“Awards programs highlight some of the more beautiful transitions, which gives homeowners in other communities an idea of what they could do,”** says Katie Evans, conservation manager at Coachella Valley Water District, which encourages communities to convert to more desert-friendly, lower water use landscaping. Ironwood Community Association’s award-winning landscaping is featured above; Palm Valley Homeowners Association’s desertscape is shown on the opposite page.

for Landscape Maintenance in Large-Scale California HOAs from the California Landscapers Contract Association for its work in the community.

“It’s very important to get control of your irrigation,” says Kahhan, who urges managers to have landscaping companies assess existing irrigation systems as part of the landscaping program. “Find out whether you have the most efficient equipment, if it’s actually watering what it’s supposed to, e.g., not over-spraying or misdirected.”

As part of its money- and water-saving effort, nearby Palm Valley Homeowners Association eliminated half of its sprinkler heads and has seen no detrimental effect, according to General Manager Gloria Kirkwood, CMCA, AMS, PCAM.

#### **PARTNER WITH THE COMMUNITY**

Farrar adds that it’s also important to work with civic leaders and the local

water authority, as Ironwood did. “CVWD designed some very effective programs that made it a little more affordable to do these renovations,” he says. “Many of the water districts now ...offer some type of incentive to associations to convert to drought-tolerant landscaping.”

“Much of the conversion activity in this market is driven by rebates for turf reduction offered by the municipalities and water districts,” says Mark Dodge, Associa – DRM’s branch president. “Probably 90 percent of our communities are in some state of conversion right now.”

In addition to receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in rebates from the City of Palm Desert and the CVWD, Palm Valley’s Kirkwood says “we’ve basically saved 48 percent of water consumption in the past 16 years.” An Associa – DRM manager, she emphasizes that “while the cost of water has

gone up, we have not increased our dollar budget because we’ve been able to reduce our water consumption.”

#### **PARTNER WITH RESIDENTS**

Along with replacing traditional plants with desertscape and reducing the number of sprinkler heads, Kirkwood adds that partnering with homeowners also has been an effective way for the award-winning Palm Valley to save money and encourage drought-tolerant landscaping.

The community, which has been named Association of the Year twice by the CAI Coachella Valley Chapter, provides the plant material and irrigation for homeowners who want to revise the landscaping themselves on common areas adjacent to their private homes, like along driveways or garages. Nearly half of Palm Valley’s 1,274 unit owners have taken part in this program.

*Julie Warren is editor of Community Manager.*