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Water-Wise Plant Recognition Program

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Water-Wise Plant Recognition Program

Abstract

A cooperative program to recognize water-wise plants for the Utah landscapes was developed by 10 horticulture and water organizations. Representatives from the organizations developed a plant list of species that were attractive in the landscape, water conserving, adapted to the climate, and available in the industry. A yellow tag with "water-wise plant" outlined by the state of Utah identified the plants. A survey conducted at the end of the first season gave favorable results. The Water-Wise Plant Tagging Program is a model of how universities, governmental agencies, and private businesses can work together to accomplish a common goal.

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Introduction

Landscapes containing low water use plants are promising alternatives to conventional turfgrass-based landscapes and have the potential to significantly reduce overall landscape water use. Public interest in low water use plants is increasing, but most consumers have limited knowledge of which plant species require less water and where they can be purchased. Many nurseries and garden centers throughout Utah already carry low water requiring plants, but the public must be able to more easily recognize these plants in order to increase their use in Utah's landscape. The program described here encouraged the use of water-conserving plants in Utah's landscapes by developing a labeling and marketing program to enable the public to recognize some of the highest quality, low water use plant species.

Water Wise Plant Tagging Program Methodology

The water-wise marketing program was initiated by Utah State University Extension and the Utah Division of Water Resources and is a cooperative effort among:

- Utah State University Extension,

- Utah State University Center for Water-Efficient Landscaping,
- Utah Division of Water Resources,
- Utah Botanical Center,
- Red Butte Gardens,
- Utah Nursery and Landscape Association,
- Utah Native Plant Society, and
- Various water agencies and water conservation coordinators.

The committee, which included representatives from each of the previously mentioned organizations, began meeting in the fall of 2002 to select water-wise plants for recommendation in Utah landscapes. Originally, the committee was organized from individuals interested in native plants and was part of the Utah Nursery and Landscape Association. The recommended plant list contained 36 trees, 45 shrubs, 90 herbaceous perennials, 18 ornamental grasses, 15 ground covers, and four vines that met the following criteria:

1. Drought-tolerant,
2. Adapted to Utah's arid climate and cold winters,
3. Available in the industry,
4. Relatively easy to maintain in the landscape, and
5. Containing desirable landscape characteristics that remain desirable under limited water availability.

The committee defined a "drought-tolerant" plant as one that requires irrigation not more than once every 2 weeks under typical conditions and full establishment. A bright yellow tag with the words "water-wise plant" outlined by the state of Utah was used to identify the plants in this program and to attract the attention of consumers. A Web site <<http://www.waterwiseplants.utah.gov/>> was developed by the Utah Division of Water Resources with input from the committee. The Web site contains specific plant installation and maintenance information and an explanation of the plant tagging program. A listing of the organizations involved in creating the plant lists and the participating garden centers is also included.

Letters describing the program and tag request forms were sent to nurseries and garden centers throughout the state in January of 2003 by the Utah Nursery and Landscape Association. The program was also introduced and tag request forms made available at the state's green industry conference in January of 2003.

The request form asked interested businesses to fill out a questionnaire estimating the type, (hang tags for trees and shrubs or stakes for perennials, ground covers, vines, and ornamental grasses), and number of tags they would need for the upcoming season. The forms were to be returned to the Utah Division of Water Resources by the end of February of 2003. Each participant was also given a 3' x 2' sign that had the words "Proud Participant of the Water-Wise Plant Tag Program," a picture of the tags, and the Web site address.

Program Evaluation

A total of 50 nurseries and garden centers from throughout the state participated in the program, and over 150,000 hang tags and 250,000 stakes were ordered for the program.

Surveys were distributed to cooperating businesses in November of 2003 to assess the effectiveness of the program. Table 1 shows the results of that assessment on a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor and 5 very well).

Table 1.
Effectiveness of the Plant Tagging Program*

Area	Rating
Consumer awareness of water-wise plants	4.13
Sales of water-wise plants	3.36

Awareness of water conservation	3.53
Acceptance of water-wise plants	3.47
* 1 = poor and 5 = very well.	

Ninety-three percent of the cooperating businesses indicated that customer interest in drought-tolerant plants had greatly increased in recent years. The survey also showed that 87% of those participating used the water-wise plant tagging program in their employee training, and 73% used the signs that were provided in their information packets. Additionally, 27% mentioned the tagging program in their advertisements and educational seminars.

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