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Osoyoos couple wins \$6,000 prize to WaterWise their yard

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KELOWNA - As people start turning off their outdoor taps and irrigation systems get blown out, the Okanagan Basin Water Board's Okanagan WaterWise program is winding up its Make Water Work campaign for another year. But not before announcing this year's Grand Prize winner of a \$6,000 WaterWise yard upgrade – Rob Abbott and Felicia Taylor of Osoyoos.

"You're kidding! I was just thinking about how we were going to redo our yard. That's incredible," said Abbott when called with the news. "I've been wanting to change our yard so that it is closer to the natural environment and using less water, so this is perfect."

Rob Abbott was among about 520 Okanagan residents who took the challenge and pledged to Make Water Work more effectively and efficiently in their yards this summer.

Make Water Work (MWW) is an initiative of the OBWB's Okanagan WaterWise program developed and delivered in partnership with local governments and utilities throughout the Okanagan. Its purpose is to tackle the largest discretionary use of water in the Okanagan – 24 per cent – on outdoor residential landscaping. The program provides tips and tools to local residents to make water work best in their yards, but also encourages people to visit the Make Water Work website and pledge to conserve for a chance to be entered to win a WaterWise yard makeover.

Looking back at this summer's program, Corinne Jackson, Communications Director for the OBWB and in charge of the MWW program, said she's pleased with this year's results.

"We were lucky this year. With the early, hot spring, and the early snowmelt, we were concerned about our valley's water supplies and the potential for a repeat of last year's serious drought," Jackson said. "Unlike last summer though, we got some rain, and we had cooler temperatures, ensuring a healthier water supply for fish and crop irrigation, preventing the problems we saw the previous year.

"That said, we know droughts are a part of the water story in the Okanagan and we will be faced with them again. Encouraging wise water use by residents, and smart water planning by local and senior governments will help ensure we're prepared," Jackson added. To that point, this summer the Water Board worked with the Province of B.C. on its Thompson Okanagan Drought Response Implementation Plan and it continuing to work with Okanagan water utilities on local drought plans, she noted. Staff are also working with various groups on projects that help prepare for drought – and flooding – for example with wetlands restoration, and determining Environmental Flow Needs of fish.

"But we also need residents to do their part and get prepared. Make Water Work is an effort to reach out to this group and help them be part of the solution," Jackson explained.

For his pledge and water conservation efforts, Abbott will now be visited by KelownaGardens.com who will provide \$4,000 in service with a landscape audit, plus irrigation and/or landscape improvements. Another \$2,000 in materials is being provided through Bylands Nursery, ProSource Irrigation and Eco Turf Farms. All prizing has been kindly donated once again this year.

"I see water scarcity as a huge issue in the valley and my wife and I want to do what we can," said Abbott. For his part, Abbott pledged this summer to 'Water Plants. Not Pavement.' And to 'Leave grass clippings as mulch,' helping feed his lawn, retain moisture and reduce evaporation.

But Abbott is happy to share his other water-saving tips. "I was also watering at night to prevent evaporation, and as minimally as possible, and was turning off the irrigation if it rained. I also hand-watered some of the plants instead of using irrigation." And, he has taken his water conservation efforts indoors too, he added, noting the low-flow showerhead he and his wife installed a few years ago, and more.

"Any effort by the Water Board and Okanagan WaterWise to make people aware is tremendous because we're all in this together and I think people are looking at how to do their part.

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"A contest like this draws attention, and I'm sure there are some who will enter who aren't necessarily aware of our water issues, but who will end up learning about them," noted Abbott.

In addition to awarding a Grand Prize, the community that collects the most number of pledges is crowned "Make Water Work Champions." This year, Peachland won the honour.

"I'm really proud of Peachlanders and I applaud them for participating and fulfilling their promise to conserve," said a very pleased Cindy Fortin, who doubles as Mayor of Peachland and OBWB Director.

Indeed, Fortin made it known that she and her Mayor's Climate Action Task Force were planning to tap into Make Water Work come spring to bring attention to climate and water issues and they were going to push for strong participation from local residents. MWW officially launched in early May and two weeks later Peachland held its own event, providing WaterWise gardening demonstrations, giving away plants from the Make Water Work Plant Collection and signing people up to take the pledge. The mayor also wrote a number of articles which ran in the local media encouraging people to Take the Challenge, and they did.

"I think it made a difference," added Fortin. "People were very receptive. We even had people show up to our event from outside Peachland and we signed them up too.

"I think the 2015 drought was a real eye-opener," the mayor said. "I know this summer was cooler and a bit wetter, but there's no doubt that we'll have more droughts in the future."

As the Okanagan's population continues to grow, the need for everyone to reduce their use is going to increase, Fortin added, suggesting tighter watering restrictions will likely be needed. Also, greywater reuse in new developments is now being encouraged as a way to conserve water on the landscape. Peachland's special MWW event, she added, was an opportunity to show residents ways to keep yards beautiful and use less water.

"The whole situation with our water supply is very important to me because water is a finite resource and our most precious resource. We all need to be more water conscious. We are seeing serious water shortages in other parts of the world and living in a semi-arid region, we have seen drought. Rather than being hit by severe water restrictions, if we have the tools and know-how to prepare, the better off we'll be," said Fortin.

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