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Seeds: Earth Day evolves, but messages still urgent -- and doable

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For many people, Earth Day is every day. Recycling is automatic. Repurpose and reuse? That just makes common sense when trying to save money.

But how far will you go to save water? Synthetic lawns and composting toilets may be in your future.

Eco-sense adds up to dollars and cents for many consumers, which is among the reasons why there will be a big turnout for today's Celebrate the Earth Festival at Roseville's Mahany Park.

The free festival is a prelude party to Sunday's 43rd Earth Day.

Since its 1970 launch, Earth Day has given new meaning to "green." Today's home and garden is much more water- and energy- conscious, thanks in part to awareness that grew out of such celebrations.

Hosted by the city's Utility Exploration Center, the fifth annual Earth Festival is to feature 95 vendors, all focused on ways to save resources. Festivalgoers can feel good about helping the planet while also helping their budgets.

"The festival allows people to connect with local businesses who are committed to reducing waste and saving water," said Matthew Davis of the Exploration Center. "People want to know how they can lower their bills and save money."

Combine that with family fun and the festival has turned into an organic hit.

"We had more than 5,000 people turn out last year," Davis said. "Our surveys indicated that they spent an average of 2 1/2 hours. The fest draws people in, and they tend to stick around quite awhile."

Among the favorite attractions for kids at the festival is the "Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom" live animal show. The owls, hawks and other critters demonstrate an underlying lesson of the event: This is their home, too.

Master gardeners will offer advice on how to save water outdoors and cut down on chemicals to fertilize or control pests.

One water-saving idea will be an attention-getter, Davis said.

"We'll have a mock frontyard with artificial grass," he said. "It looks amazing. You can see what you can do while saving a lot of water."

Meanwhile, other water savers are showing up at Lowe's and other home-improvement centers: composting toilets.

A logical next step to low-flow commodes, these are no-flow toilets. Instead, waste is transformed aerobically into high-grade garden compost (for ornamental plant use only).

"Our market has really shifted over the years," said Fraser Sneddon of Sun-Mar Corp. "The early adapters were the environmental crowd. We sold a lot for seasonal properties such as a cabin in the woods or lakefront property where you couldn't put in a conventional toilet. ... Now, 20 percent of our sales are residential applications."

Sun-Mar is a Canadian company making composting toilets as well as garden composters. The toilets, which look very similar to low-flow toilets, cost \$1,500 to \$2,500.

"In North America, toilets account for 30 to 40 percent of our home indoor water use," Sneddon said. "But you're using drinking-quality water to flush waste down the drain.

"People think toilets need to use water to flush," he added, "but you're just moving waste. There are alternatives."

Environmental concerns have spurred some composting toilet sales, but so has ease of installation, Sneddon said. The self-contained units can be installed in pool houses, barns, sheds - just about anywhere a toilet is needed.

They can come indoors, too. The toilets' composting process is odorless. (For more details, www.sun-mar.com.)

About a quarter of the United States still uses septic systems, Sneddon added. The composting toilet is an alternative to installing a new tank.

"The more people use them, the more comfortable they'll become with it," Sneddon said. "I truly think our product is the ultimate toilet in the evolution of toilets."

Trees add up

Just in time for Earth Day, the Sacramento Tree Foundation has announced that it has reached its goal of 30,000 new trees to be planted between now and next Arbor Day, March 7. The foundation has received more than 31,000 pledges to plant trees.

"The greater Sacramento community has once again embraced the value of trees," said executive director Ray Trethewey. "Trees clean the air we breathe, cool our homes in the summer and make our neighborhoods healthy and attractive."

It's not too late to join the tree campaign. Learn more at www.30Ktrees.com.

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