

## The Eight Great

### Try these water-saving tips

By

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SANTA CRUZ -- While rain-starved Santa Cruz County is currently getting walloped by the second big storm of the winter, here's the bad news: Storm or not, we're still in a drought.

While this storm series could drop 5 inches or more locally, Santa Cruz County's average annual precipitation is 31 inches, and we're not even close to that over the past year.

While many area water agencies have called for voluntary water rationing, conservation will soon be mandatory for Santa Cruz Water Department customers. The City Council on Tuesday formally declared a water shortage emergency, which will subject residential customers to rationing and penalty pricing for exceeding limits beginning May 1.

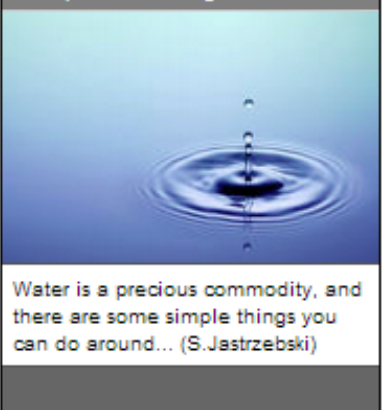
Well, we're here to help. Thanks to a few tricks, you can easily save water (and money) at home.

1. First of all, the best way to save water is to learn how much you're using and where you're getting a little too heavy-handed. Go to [www.home-water-works.org](http://www.home-water-works.org) and see just how your water usage affects your carbon footprint, and compare your overall consumption to nearby water-efficient houses. Once you see the numbers, it'll be easier to decide which projects to tackle. Another way to get to know your water usage? Simply look at your bills. Learn to read your water bill, and water meters, and know how much you're using, said Eileen Cross, spokeswoman for the Santa Cruz Water Department.

2. The average American home uses 80,000 gallons per year, according to Taylor Darling, co-founder of Santa Cruz Green Builders. By installing low-flow toilets, showers and faucets, you can cut your water consumption in half. Darling recommends Niagara Conservation products. "When you're using them, it feels like you're getting plenty of water, but you're saving so much," he said. "A lot of people think with low-flow toilets, you have to flush twice, but a lot of them get 10 out of 10 for flushing power. They're really powerful."

3. While these options sound pricey -- a Niagara Conservation toilet can put you back about \$200 -- there are ways you can save when installing a new porcelain throne. The city of Santa Cruz offers various rebates for installing low-flow fixtures, including up to \$150 for high-efficiency toilets. "We have a lot of different rebates because they work," Cross said. "We give rebates for things that are very effective at saving water."

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4. Saving water is all about breaking habits, and we've all got those nasty little routines that go beyond how long we stand under a running shower head. How about letting the water run while we brush our teeth? Wash our faces? Doing the dishes? One of the best ways to save money is to simply turn off the water during these tasks, Cross said. "I mean, there are the obvious things, like don't run the sink when you're brushing your teeth or wash your dishes in a container if you're not using a dishwasher," she said. You can also install faucet aerators, which are available at local hardware stores for just a few bucks. The simple attachment will cut back on water usage while still providing a steady flow.

5. Ultimately, desperate times call for some grown-up decisions, said Cara Meyers, co-owner of DIG Nursery in Santa Cruz and Hidden Gardens Nursery and landscape in Aptos. While you may love taking long, luxurious baths while listening to your backyard water fountains trickle, guess what? You need to sacrifice a few things. "If people don't want to pay premium water amounts, they're going to have to choose whether or not they want to water," Meyers said. "You can take a 10-minute shower or a five-minute shower and then have a veggie garden."

6. Plant a drought-resistant garden: Sure, we all love our California natives, but at the end of the day, those bulbs, ferns and poppies need tons of water, Meyers said. Want a better option to spruce up your yard without contributing to the drought? Try simply using a few colorful fixtures, Meyers said. "Big colorful pots are a nice way to add color to your garden," she said. If you want more ideas on sprucing up your yard without too much water, check out DIG's workshop at 11 a.m. Saturday, March 8, at 420 Water St.

7. Hardscape, hardscape, hardscape. This means lots of patios, paths, walkways, stones -- you get the idea. If you're relying on furniture, pots and other non-living fixtures, you obviously won't have to water them. And please, try to drop the idea of growing a lawn, Darling said. "Outside water use is a big one, and lawns just suck up water; they're like the least water-efficient landscaping."

8. We've all heard about reusing water, and now's the time to hop on the bandwagon. With rainwater catchment systems, you can reuse precipitation, but when you're in a drought, that's easier said than done. Your best bet is to rely on grey water -- water you've already used in your home, such as shower or laundry machine water -- Darling said. "With grey water, you're actually gathering water, so that's always good in a drought." The Central Coast Greywater Alliance hosts regular workshops throughout the Monterey Bay area. Check out [www.centralcoastgreywater.org](http://www.centralcoastgreywater.org).