

Sacramento couple who let lawn die to save water face \$746 fine

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While a neighbor waters a lawn in the background, Anne Hartridge surveys her own east Sacramento yard. She has been threatened with a city code enforcement fine for letting her lawn die to save water. She spread mulch last weekend, but the city says that may not suffice. Randall Benton / rbenton@sacbee.com

If Sacramento wanted a poster couple for its "green city" aspirations, it would be hard to do better than Anne Hartridge and Matt George.

The husband and wife bought a home in east Sacramento for easy biking to work and shopping. They installed solar panels and efficient appliances. Their laundry dries on a clothesline.

They didn't own a car until four years ago, when their eldest son, then 18 months old, was being treated frequently for food allergies. They bought a Prius.

So when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a statewide drought June 4, Hartridge decided it was only right to let her front lawn die to save water.

"The whole water conservation ethic is very important to me," said Hartridge, a state employee who bikes or rides the bus to work.

But that ethic didn't agree with her neighbors, or with the city.

Before Hartridge could plan new landscaping, a neighbor complained to the city about her brown lawn, and the Code Enforcement Department slapped the family with a citation.

Their small brick home was declared a "public nuisance" in violation of city code section 17.68.010, which states that front yards "shall be irrigated, landscaped and maintained."

A \$746 fine will be next unless they correct the violation.

"In order to make the lawn go, I would have had to keep watering it intensely, and since the drought was declared, I decided that wasn't a good idea," said Hartridge. "Honestly, I think there's a disconnect within the city about priorities."

Two weeks ago, The Bee reported that Sacramento's per capita water use is among the greatest in the world. Later that week, the same day Hartridge got the citation, an audit revealed that the city has lost or misplaced nearly 5,000 water meters, out of more than 100,000 it must install citywide to comply with state law.

"On one hand they're mislaying their water meters, and on the other hand they going out and putting enforcement on people who don't have green lawns," Hartridge said. "And there's water running down the gutters of my neighborhood every day."

City laws forbid landscape irrigation on Mondays (code section 13.04.860), between noon and 6 p.m. (13.04.860), and to such an extent that water runs into gutters (13.04.850).

All these violations could be seen on Hartridge's street this week – one street among thousands in Sacramento.

Neighbor Lois Guy, a retiree, thinks the situation is "crazy."

"It's private property, after all," she said Tuesday while trimming hedges at her home around the corner from Hartridge's. "They're in the process of doing something (with the lawn). So they should be left alone while they're trying to improve it."

Dennis Kubo, city code enforcement manager, said his department does not communicate with the Utilities Department about drought concerns or water efficiency. His department only enforces health and safety and "general welfare" codes.

"The zoning ordinance tells us that the property owner's got to have landscaping. So that's what we have to do," he said.

The city's landscaping rule is intended to maintain neighborhood visual standards to prevent one neighbor's tastes from harming another's property values.

The rule was the subject of much conflict last year when amended to provide gardeners leeway to grow more than grass. Sacramentans can now grow large trees, shrubs and, yes, even food in their front yards without fear of reprisal.

But the rules still require front landscaping to be irrigated, which means scores of homeowners could be penalized for growing cacti or other drought-tolerant vegetation.

"The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing when it comes to the city," said Karen Baumann, who triggered last year's controversy after she was cited in 2005 for inadequate lawn cover after she removed grass to plant vegetables and flowers in her front yard.

Hartridge was already having trouble keeping her lawn green when nature turned up the heat this spring. She watered every other day and even tried reseeding. But it didn't take.

For her it was a natural decision to stop watering the grass after the governor's drought declaration. But she never got a chance to plan new landscaping before the lawn police arrived.

Last Thursday, the day after the citation came in the mail, she called Code Enforcement to find out how to correct the violation. She was told an e-mail with landscaping solutions would be forthcoming. It never arrived.

She also called her city councilman, Steve Cohn, who did not respond. Cohn also didn't return a call from The Bee on Tuesday.

Last weekend she decided to cover what's left of her small lawn with redwood mulch, which she spread around a few hydrangeas and azaleas that survive with occasional water.

Hartridge awaits reinspection by Code Enforcement. She does not know when that will happen or whether her yard will comply.

Probably not, Kubo said. Mulch is allowed only as one of the "design elements ... integrated as part of the landscape," according to code section 17.68.010(1)a(1)b.

"If it's just one tree out there, maybe a couple of plants and then the whole front yard is loaded with bark," he said, "then no, that's not going to meet the criteria."