

California's Drought Makes It Rain Big Bucks For Local Businesses

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Los Angeles started offering a \$3.75 rebate on every square foot of grass replaced with a drought-friendly landscape. The drought is a boost in business for local conservation entrepreneurs.

Frederic J. Brown/AFP/Getty

When people call up Leigh Jerrard, founder of Greywater Corps, they're greeted with a recorded message: "Note that we are overwhelmed with inquiries right now, so it may be a while before we get back to you. But have faith."

Jerrard's company helps homeowners with the complicated process of installing their own Greywater systems. The system takes drainage from showers or washing machines and uses it to water lawns.

It sounds like a great idea now, but six years ago, when Jerrard started the company, few people were interested.

"Up until about a year ago, it's been pretty slow," Jerrard says. "[But] things started to pick up. Last year was the first year we were solvent. Within the last month or two, the phone has been ringing off the hook."

In between interviewing to add another employee and another site visit, Jerrard managed to squeeze in an initial consultation for Lisa Mann at her Craftsman-style home in Pasadena.

After about an hour of dispensing practical advice and sharing his water-use philosophy, Jerrard convinces Mann to jump on board.

"Sign me up," she says. "I'm serious. We got to do this."

Watering with Greywater will be more expensive and complicated than Mann initially thought. But to her, it's worth it.

"It seems like the drought never ends. It's been here and it doesn't seem it is going away," she says. "So we need to find ways to landscape and to be more efficient with our house."

That sentiment is also helping entrepreneurs such as Gayle Butensky. She started a drought-tolerant landscaping business five years ago. They specialize in using plants native to California.

"People have been doing this for years and years and years," she says. "It's just much more apparent now. Because once one person does, the next person sees it."

Butensky adds that going native doesn't mean sacrificing aesthetics.

"It doesn't have to look like a desert. It doesn't have to look like rocks. It can look like a nice garden."

All those native plants have to come from somewhere, which has made California Cactus Center a very popular shop these days. It's been in Molly Thongthiraj's family for 38 years.

"When we first started it was not mainstream, but now it is," she says.

Because of the drought, Thongthiraj says, business has never been better — up 20 percent since last year.

John Gayle is one of her colleagues.

"You know there's always been a significant client base for people who were always collectors of cactuses and succulents," he says. "But I think now it's a necessity."

It's also a cost-saver because of government incentives.

Last year, Los Angeles started offering a \$3.75 rebate on every square foot of grass homeowners rip out and replace with a drought-friendly landscape.

No company has benefited more than Turf Terminators.

"Every time we think we've built the organization to a size where we think it's going to meet demand, demand just sort of jumps up and we have to grow again," says Julian Fox, the company's chief operating officer.

When Turf Terminators started just 10 months ago, it had three full-time employees. Now it has more than 500.

With no end in sight, California's drought may present a long-term boost for local entrepreneurs.