



# Policies and Programs for Water-Wise Residential Landscaping in Utah

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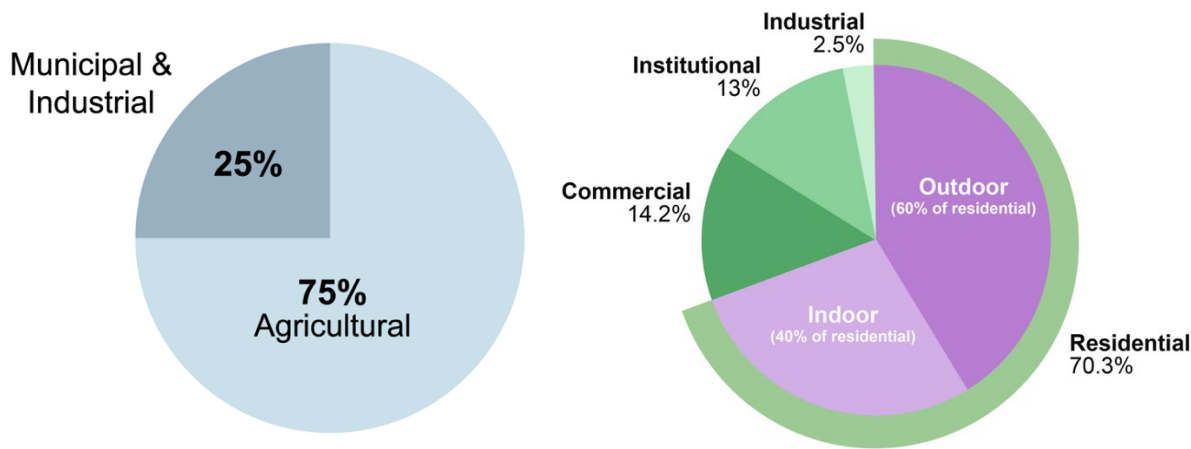
Water-wise landscaping is the practice of using plants in a landscape that are adapted to local conditions and only need small amounts of water. Converting yards to water-wise landscaping conserves water and is a climate adaptation action residents can take to benefit Utah as temperatures rise and drought becomes more common. Many policies and programs in Utah help residents use water conscientiously and make changes. Policies shape water-wise landscaping practices by providing incentives, setting standards, and regulating water use. Programs provide a framework to influence communities to incorporate sustainable practices. Urban areas in Utah, such as the Great Salt Lake area, are divided into water districts to supply water to communities. Some water districts fund programs and initiatives promoting water conservation, as does the state's Division of Water Resources. This fact sheet provides information regarding current and future water-wise landscaping policies and programs in Utah.

## Outdoor Water Use in Utah

Water-wise landscaping is crucial for sustainable living in arid regions like Utah. According to Utah's Water Resources Plan, Utah uses about 4,751,000 acre-feet of diverted water each year (Utah Division of Water Resources [DWR], 2021). The agricultural sector uses about 75%, and the municipal and industrial sector uses the remaining 25% (Figure 1, left; DWR, 2021). Within the municipal and industrial sector, over 70% goes toward residential use, and 60% of that is applied to household landscapes (Figure 1, right; DWR, 2021). All told, outdoor residential water use accounts for about 11% of Utah's total annual diverted water, or 500,993 acre-feet of water per year. Saving water in outdoor residential settings depends on watering existing vegetation appropriately and adopting [water-wise landscaping practices](#) so less water is needed (Endter-Wada et al., 2008; Institute of Land, Water, and Air, 2023). As Utah's population continues to grow and summer temperatures continue to rise, water-wise landscaping will help Utahns conserve water and adapt to the changing climate (DWR, 2021; Global Change Research Program, 2023).



*This water-wise Utah garden uses mulch, drought-tolerant plants, and drip irrigation.*



**Figure 1.** *Utah's Water Use: (left) diverted water use by sector, and (right) residential use accounts for over 70% of municipal and industrial diverted water; 60% of residential water is used outdoors.*

Data source: DWR, 2021

## Current Policies Affecting Outdoor Water Use in Utah

Three bills passed in 2023 affect water use by Utah's urban residents. House Bill (H.B.) 450 focuses on homeowner associations (HOAs), Senate Bill (S.B.) 118 provides incentives for property owners, and H.B. 307 addresses the creation of a public-private partnership to promote conversations and actions that further water conservation.

### **H.B. 450, Landscaping Requirements**

H.B. 450 stops associations such as HOAs from preventing property owners from implementing water-wise landscaping. H.B. 450 amends the previous bill, H.B. 282, which stated that associations can fine residents if shrubs are not watered properly or if they disregard HOA design guidelines. H.B. 282 also allowed HOAs to require residents to install lawns over 100% of their landscapes. H.B. 450 makes two key changes. First, associations can now only require up to 50% of a resident's landscape to be non-water-wise vegetation (i.e., plants that are not adapted to Utah's arid climate). Second, associations cannot require a resident to install or keep lawn in an area that is less than 8 feet wide. These changes give residents living in HOAs more freedom to implement water-wise landscaping.

### **S.B. 118, Water Efficient Landscaping Incentives**

S.B. 118 promotes water-wise landscaping by providing incentives for property owners. It defines terms, authorizes water conservancy districts to receive grants for incentives, sets conditions for owners to qualify, and outlines requirements for tracking implementation of water use efficiency standards. In addition, the bill amends sections of the Utah Code related to water-wise landscaping, detailing eligibility criteria and guidelines for landscape conversion incentive programs. This bill established the Utah Water Savers program, described in the "Local and State Programs" section.

### **H.B. 307, Utah WaterWays**

H.B. 307 created the Utah WaterWays partnership, a public-private program focused on water education and conservation projects in Utah. The goals of the program include optimizing water use through policy discussions, effective communication, and support for grants and rebate programs. Utah WaterWays also aims to increase public awareness and engagement in water conservation efforts statewide.

## Potential Policies in Future Legislative Sessions

The following bills did not pass both Utah's House and Senate in 2023 but could be revisited in the coming years.

### [H.B. 401, Water Usage Amendments](#)

This amendment would largely prohibit irrigating lawns during the off-season from October 1 to April 30 in the following counties: Box Elder, Cache, Davis, Morgan, Rich, Salt Lake, Summit, Tooele, Utah, Wasatch, and Weber. Violations would incur fines, and municipalities and water providers would be allowed to enforce additional penalties or restrictions. The Division of Water Resources would be required to estimate and publish the amount of water saved from not irrigating during the off-season.

### [S.B. 118, Water Efficiency Amendments](#)

This amendment would establish incentives for water-wise landscaping in new residential developments within the Great Salt Lake Basin. Property owners would be rewarded for installing less turfgrass when building a new house. The bill would also provide grants and incentives for qualifying applicants who live outside of an incentive program area.

### [Possibilities for Future Bills](#)

Utah can improve water conservation by drawing inspiration from successful policies enacted in other regions, such as California's S.B. 606 and Assembly Bill (A.B.) 1668 (California State Water Resources Control Board, 2018). In California, these bills reduced outdoor water use by requiring water suppliers to take actions that reduce outdoor irrigation, limit sprinkler timing and type, and restrict watering after rain. These bills made conservation efforts easier for residents because it was the water suppliers' responsibility to monitor and report water use and follow drought contingency plans.

For Utah, the next steps in water-wise landscaping and conservation could include establishing specific water use reduction goals and mandating that water suppliers adhere to annual water allocation and drought contingency plans. While Utah has made great strides in education programs to promote water conservation, achieving specific goals will require additional policy implementation and accountability.

## Local and State Programs

### [Slow the Flow](#)

[Slow the Flow](#) is a water conservation public information campaign funded by the Governor's Water Conservation Team. The Slow the Flow website consolidates information about water-wise [landscaping](#) and [rebate](#) programs, publishes a weekly county-specific [lawn watering guide](#) that accounts for local weather, and provides a platform for people to sign up for a free [water check](#), where a trained professional evaluates outdoor water use and creates a customized irrigation plan.



### [Utah Water Savers Rebate Program](#)

[Utah Water Savers](#) offers rebates statewide for WaterSense-certified smart irrigation controllers and water-efficient toilets. It also provides incentives for property owners in selected [areas throughout the state](#) to replace their water-intensive lawns with water-wise landscaping. Standards and incentive amounts vary based on the area.



## WaterSense

[WaterSense](#) is a national program under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that is relevant for Utah residents. WaterSense certifies water-efficient products, making them eligible for Utah’s rebate programs, and provides guidelines for both indoor and outdoor water conservation.



## Localscapes

A "Localscape" is a specialized landscaping approach for Utah's climate. The idea was formed by a team of horticulturists, landscape designers, irrigation experts, and members of the water industry. The [Localscapes](#) website highlights design ideas that cater to different aesthetics for full yards and parking strips. The platform includes instructional videos, guides, and tips.



## Water-Wise Demonstration Gardens

Throughout Utah, numerous public gardens are dedicated to promoting water-wise landscaping and sustainable gardening practices. These gardens demonstrate how to use water-efficient plants, smart irrigation systems, and eco-friendly gardening techniques, offering practical examples for creating vibrant landscapes with minimal water usage. Some gardens host educational programs, workshops, and events to empower the community with knowledge and skills for implementing water-wise practices at home.

- [Ogden Botanical Gardens](#)—includes the Water Conservation Garden and Water-Wise Perennial Garden (Ogden, UT)
- [Weber Basin Water Conservation Learning Garden](#) (Layton, UT)
- [Utah State University Botanical Garden](#) (Kaysville, UT)
- [Greater Avenues Water Conservation Demonstration Garden](#) (Salt Lake City, UT)
- [Conservation Garden Park](#) (West Jordan, UT)
- [Sego Lily Gardens](#) (Sandy, UT)
- [The Boilers—A Natural Spring and Conservation Garden](#) (Washington, UT)
- [Red Hills Desert Garden](#) (St. George, UT)



*Teaching and demonstration gardens throughout Utah help residents learn water-wise landscaping practices.*

## Conclusion

Water conservation is a critical issue for Utah, and improvements can be made to outdoor residential water use to conserve water and adapt to hotter summers. While legislative efforts and community programs in Utah promote water-wise landscaping that reduces outdoor water use, further actions will likely be needed to achieve sustainable water management.

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