Ground for debate
Maggie Camperlengo is certain the grass will always be greener on the other side. The full article will be available online for a limited time:
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Woman's landscaping project causes a dust-up in Hurst, with neighbors saying the yard looks tacky
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Maggie Camperlengo is using a landscaping method called xeriscaping, which is environmentally friendly and can conserve water. Hurst officials were initially skeptical of the project but have reconsidered.

HURST -- Maggie Camperlengo is certain the grass will always be greener on the other side.

Her Brookridge Drive front yard is surrounded by manicured green lawns that require regular watering. She prefers a more native look.

But her neighbors aren't pleased with her efforts at xeriscaping, an environmentally friendly landscaping technique that uses plants, such as yuccas and cactuses, that can survive in dry weather and don't require much watering.

Neighbors say her yard, which includes statues of a buffalo and a desert tortoise, as well as bovine skulls and a prairie dog scene, is tacky.

"We are protesting the weeds and just bare dirt," said Dennis Olson, who has lived on Brookridge Drive for 11 years. "You can look at other Southwest styles of decorating and they don't look derelict. Weeds and dirt just don't cut the mustard."

Hurst officials were initially skeptical of Camperlengo's landscaping. She received a warning letter from code enforcement officials in June that said her yard was offensive to the neighborhood, fit the city's definition of a nuisance and contained high weeds and grass.

Camperlengo, who is working on a graduate degree in conservation biology at the University of Texas at Arlington, submitted the landscaping plan drawn up by a local architect she hired, and officials reconsidered.

"There are yards like this in Fort Worth and other parts of Texas," Camperlengo said. "This part of the city just isn't used to this."

Hurst is working with her so she can complete her project, said Assistant City Manager Jeff Jones. She has removed some limbs and high weeds that were cited in the warning, he said.

"I think the neighbors will have to see the results of the landscaping plan that they're implementing," he said.

During summer months, up to 60 percent of the water that an average household uses can be for landscape maintenance, according to the Texas Cooperative Extension service in Tarrant County. Xeriscaping, when properly done, can help conserve water and protect the environment compared with traditional landscaping, which requires lots of water, said Steve Chaney, a horticulturist with the extension service.

"People have a large misunderstanding of xeriscaping," he said. "They think it's just cactus, and it can be. But you also can have all types of wildflowers and roses. People just aren't used to seeing this in their front yards."
Some area homeowners and cities are using the landscaping technique, including Arlington, which has a xeriscape garden in Veterans Park.

With much of Texas suffering a drought, many cities, including Hurst, have adopted mandatory watering restrictions. Hurst has banned lawn watering and landscape irrigation between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., except by hand-watering or soaker hoses, until Sept. 30.

As populations grow and water supplies remain the same, xeriscaping is becoming more popular, Chaney said. Texas is slowly moving to join states such as Nevada and New Mexico that have state-regulated lawn maintenance that stipulates how high grass can be and how much landscape watering can be done, he said.

"A lot of people insist on the highly manicured, green lawns that require a lot of watering," he said. "That's OK for them, but at some point the state may step in and say you no longer have that ability. In some states, homeowners are allowed to only have drip irrigation systems and not sprinklers."

Camperlengo says that many on her street don't understand xeriscaping and that she has filed a police report on one neighbor for trespassing on her property to get photos to send to the city.

She says her project is expensive, with an estimated budget of $45,000.

"Our whole idea is to coexist with nature, not fight it," she said.

Olson said that he and other neighbors have approached Camperlengo's property and taken photos from the street but that no one has trespassed. Neighbors would prefer to see a clean, neat and manicured lawn similar to others in the neighborhood, he said.

"What we're trying to say to her is that you have some obligation to try to fit in with the neighborhood," he said.

LANDSCAPING TIPS TO HELP SAVE WATER

Add organic matter to the soil of shrub and flower beds to increase plant health and conserve water.

Select trees, shrubs and ground covers based on how they will adapt to the region's soil and climate.

Carefully select grass. Turf grasses require more frequent watering and maintenance than most other landscape plants.

Zone irrigation system so grass can be watered more frequently than ground covers, shrubs and trees. Using drip irrigation can conserve water.

Use mulch, which significantly lowers moisture evaporation from the soil and reduces weeds, prevents soil compaction and keeps soil temperatures lower.

Mow grass at proper height and apply fertilizer at the proper time and in the proper amount.

SOURCE: Texas Cooperative Extension Service