LESS LAWN MORE SAVINGS

Turning Nonfunctional Lawn Into Spaces for Play, Learning, and Community

California Lilac *Ceanothus spp., California native*

Project Snapshot

Zion Lutheran Church and Preschool

LOCATION: Fallbrook, San Diego County

LEAD ENTITY: Zion Lutheran Church and Preschool

SUPPORT: County of San Diego Landscape Optimization Service (LOS), Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, San Diego County Water Authority, and Fallbrook Public Utilities District, with technical assistance from Environmental Incentives, Monarch Environmental, and O'Connell Landscaping

Project Overview

Located in Fallbrook in northern San Diego County, Zion Lutheran Church saw opportunity in transforming large swaths of unused lawn. The church, which has an on-site preschool and kindergarten, transformed its landscape to better serve its dual role as a place of worship and a learning environment. The project converted 21,165 square feet of lawn into a water-wise landscape with community benefits beyond its congregation.

Across the site, new seating areas framed by colorful, water-wise shrubs created inviting gathering spaces for staff and visitors. Inside the school grounds, the playground was redesigned into a nature-based play environment, featuring raised garden beds for hands-on learning about vegetables and flowers, a sand pit, and decomposed granite walkways that double as permeable play areas.

The makeover helps wildlife while tackling stormwater runoff. A new rain garden filled with native plants captures stormwater, allowing it to naturally percolate into the soil. The plants provide food and habitat for birds, butterflies, and bees. The combination of native plants, water-saving features, and functional spaces now provides a welcoming, educational, and environmentally resilient landscape.

"The beautiful, park-like outdoor play space is better than any of us could have imagined or afforded. We are so thankful for the experts who helped us throughout the rebate process."

Kara Pingel
Zion Director

BEFORE

Photo by Zion Lutheran Church

AFTER: *2 years after installation*

Photo by Zion Lutheran Church

Garden Features

Spaces around the Church office were designed to include outdoor seating areas for staff and visitors. A water-wise plant palette—emphasizing natives such as California Buckwheat and Cleveland Sage—provides habitat for pollinators and thrives in dry conditions. A "vegetated rain garden"—filled with plants, not just cobbles—allows stormwater to infiltrate into the landscape instead of running off-site.

Project Highlights

PROJECT FEATURE	DETAIL
Lawn Removed	21,165 square feet replaced with water-wise landscaping
Plant Palette	Low-maintenance, kid-friendly water-wise shrubs and grasses, as well as native plants to support pollinators and long-term resilience
Landscape Features	Nature-based play areas, decomposed granite walkways, seating areas, vegetated rain garden
Water Savings	1 million gallons annually (enough for 9-10 households)
Project Timeline	12 months; completed June 2023
Installation Approach	Professionally designed and installed, with stormwater feature integration and project management by the Landscape Optimization Service team
Project Cost	Approximately $100,000 total (~$4.73 per sq ft)
Funding Sources	Approximately $79,000 (~79% of total cost) in utility incentives and stacked rebates from the County of San Diego's Watershed Protection Program, Metropolitan Water District, San Diego County Water Authority, and Fallbrook Public Utilities District (rebate levels vary by community)
Community Benefits	Outdoor classrooms, play-based learning, stormwater capture, and inviting gathering spaces
Return on Investment	Estimated $66,000 in water utility bill savings over 10 years. Payback period of about 3 years, with additional long-term savings possible from reduced mowing, fertilizer, and other lawn maintenance costs

Get Started in Your Community

1. Identify underused lawns and consider redesigning them as classrooms, gathering areas, or other spaces that serve community needs.
2. Engage stakeholders early (staff, parents, congregation) to build support for the project.
3. Work with local agencies to secure funding and technical support.
4. Incorporate native plants that provide shade, habitat, and long-term water savings.
5. Engage the community through education and events.

Tips for Other Properties

Think Multi-Use: Redesign underused landscapes to create spaces for play and learning.

Engage Students and Congregants: Incorporate gardens and interactive elements that encourage hands-on learning.

Leverage Incentives: Explore rebate and technical assistance programs that can significantly reduce project costs.

Design for Resilience: Pair water savings with stormwater management and pollinator habitat to maximize benefits.

Learn from Others: Explore additional case studies and resources at NonFunctionalTurfCA.org.

CALIFORNIA WATER EFFICIENCY PARTNERSHIP

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