

Want to go water-wise? In parts of Utah, it pays.

The “Flip Your Strip” program offers rebates to Utah residents who remove the grass from their park strips.

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Removing the grass from your park strip — the area between the sidewalk and the street — can take a little work, but in more counties than ever, you could get paid to do it.



Cindi Griswald is one of these rebate recipients. She came across the opportunity after her husband’s death, when one of her first tasks was to resolve her home’s messy sprinkler system.

“It was on my to-do list to get those sprinklers taken care of after he was gone,” she said. As she explored her options for replacing the sprinklers, she discovered that getting rid of the sod altogether might be the best choice, especially when the grass on her park strip wasn’t serving any particular purpose.

“It seemed pretty daunting initially,” Griswald said. “But I figured if I was gonna do it, I might as well go for it.”

Griswald’s area offers a “Flip Your Strip” program, in which residents receive rebates for re-landscaping from sod to water-wise landscaping. Despite the laundry-list of requirements under the program, Griswald said she wound up with something she’s “pretty proud of.”

“There’s definitely the intrinsic reward of just knowing that you’re beautifying the community,” she said. “It’s not just a pile of rocks you’re replacing the sod with. You’re saving tons of water and helping your state, helping your city and community. To me that was pretty motivating.”

How it works

West Jordan Water Conservancy District’s Flip Your Strip program pays users a dollar for each square foot of their strip they “flip.” Flipping entails removing the grass from the strip and replacing it with a mix of mulch, drip irrigation and plant coverage. The type of mulch someone uses can vary, but can include rocks and bark mulch. Participants can also choose from a wide selection of native plants.

The District also offers an increased rebate amount — \$1.25 per square foot — if the user opts to participate in the District’s training program, which educates on various water-wise designs for park strips.

To participate, residents must currently have a healthy grass lawn in their park strip, meaning no removed or killed grass, and no artificial turf. And once users get started, they have to comply with several guidelines, including that half of the strip must be covered by perennial plants and the strip must be watered using low-volume drip irrigation.

According to the organization's Megan Jenkins, Flip Your Strip is effective because it targets a smaller portion of the lawn, making progress seem more achievable.

"It's a beneficial program for us because we find that the park strip is a really easy place for homeowners to start making a transition to a more water-efficient yard," she said. "The small project doesn't seem as intimidating as maybe examining your entire landscape and trying to find a way to redo the entire thing."

The program has been around since 2017 in the district. Each year, it's gained more users. This year has already seen a 166% increase in participation over last year, she said, with 303 applications submitted already.

That doesn't mean that others haven't flipped their strips, though. She noted that, oftentimes, peer pressure means that when someone flips their strip, their neighbors follow suit. Sometimes those neighbors aren't counted in program participation.

Growing the program

Flip Your Strip originally only applied to some of Salt Lake County. Last week, Central Utah Water Conservancy District (CUWCD) announced its own Flip Your Strip Program. Now, the program is available to water users supplied by CUWCD (including Salt Lake, Utah, Wasatch, Duchesne, Uintah, Sanpete, and Uintah County) Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District and some within the Weber County Water Conservancy District. New homeowners hoping to take advantage of the program's Central Utah expansion can get the same rebates — \$1 per square foot and \$1.25 with the class — as those in Jordan Valley. Eligibility in the region officially opened on August 1.

"We can't ignore outdoor water waste, and with our rapid growth we need to focus on more sustainable landscapes that not only save water but look good too," said Gene Shawcroft, General Manager of the Central Utah Water Conservancy District.

Central Utah will also adopt the Localscapes program, which provides a similar rebate for general lawn re-landscaping beyond the park strip. Rebekah Dunham Connors and her family have done both the Localscapes and the Flip Your Strip programs, and said the Flip Your Strip aspect is much easier and a good place to start. With both programs, she noted, many people misunderstand the point — they aren't meant to reduce lawns to barren wasteland.

"That's a misconception, that you have to tear out all your grass, and then just put in rocks," she said.

"But that's not at all what we found, and it's not the aim of the program. They don't want you to not grow anything, they just want you to be more purposeful in what you're using your water for."

Utah residents can flip their strip without the incentive program, and many do. But without program requirements, those who flip their strip on their own may not follow the same guidelines as those who are receiving a rebate. One of these requirements is plant coverage. Alyssa Johanson of West Jordan noticed when she looked down her street that some people in her neighborhood were flipping their strips, but they were either cementing the strip or putting rocks in.

“A lot of times the rocks just end up growing lots of weeds, and the cement is a bunch of cement,” Johanson said. “We haven’t necessarily seen a lot of great examples around us. We wanted to participate in the program because of the requirement to keep plants in the area and have it be a little more pretty.”

Because they live in West Jordan, the Johansons were able to visit the district’s conservation garden, which features local plants ideal for waterwise landscaping. The garden, she said, was part of what inspired the family to make the switch.

Jenkins said it’s hard to track the overall impact of the program in terms of aggregate water savings. It’s estimated that flipping one’s strip saves on average between 5,000 and 8,000 gallons enough to fill a commercial tanker truck with water. Those who spoke to the Tribune all reported remarkable water savings; Dunham Connors said her property used 163,000 gallons in total usage between April and September of 2018 — a number which dropped to 49,000 gallons in 2019. The drop was the result of participating in both the Flip Your Strip program and Localscapes program.

Flipping without rebates

While the addition of Central Utah to Flip Your Strip’s reach means that many more Utahns can access the program, there are still many counties that are not covered. Also, these programs do fill up as water districts have only so many staff to help homeowners through the process. But that doesn’t mean flipping your strip isn’t an option.

Mandy Hutchison of Ogden lives out of the geographic scope of Flip Your Strip. Her neighbor had already made the move, and she decided to put in the work without the rebate.

“Flipping the park strip was not overly hard to do,” she said. She noted that getting rid of all the grass was by far the most challenging aspect, but she was able to get someone else to do that for her. Still, she said more Ogden residents would take advantage of the opportunity if the incentive existed. “If Flip Your Strip had offered a rebate, that would’ve been really nice.”

Now, there are three homeowners on Hutchison’s street that she knows of that are considering flipping their strips. She’s gotten plenty of compliments, and she’s even worked on re-landscaping the backyard. So far she’s noticed a 30% drop in water use.

Her advice to those about to embark on the nonincentivized journey: research local laws.

In Ogden, she couldn’t grow plants on her strip higher than a few feet. Without the program, she said, it’s important to figure out what you can and can’t do.