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Gardening show welcomes new host

By Isaiah Brookshire, Staff Writer

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There's a bustle of activity at Santa Barbara's City Hall. A cameraman in headphones signals the tape is rolling. Backed by a dozen flickering monitors showing live feeds, a news anchor flashes a serious look at the camera and begins speaking in a grave tone.

She explains that a pair of local men have gone missing and her reporters are working feverishly to find them. She holds a finger to her ear and tells the audience that an anonymous tip has placed the men somewhere in Santa Barbara. "Let's go live to our reporter in the field," she says.

There's only one problem – there isn't any reporter and the woman speaking isn't really a news anchor. What has transpired is one of several takes being shot for the county's quarterly television program Garden Wise Guys.

So how are mysterious disappearances and gardening related? It's all part of a storyline that will explain the show's transition between hosts. The missing men are former hosts Billy Goodnick and Owen Dell. The woman playing the anchor is incoming host Dana Halverson. It's also a bridge between formats. When Goodnick and Dell were heading up the show's writing, they brought their

unique blend of zany humor and spoof storylines along with them. Now, the show is moving to a news magazine format but hoping to keep some of the laughs that made the original endearing.

The show has run for 17 episodes and has been on the airwaves for nearly five years. During that time, the core message has remained the same: Landscaping doesn't have to equal a huge water bill. The show is funded by the major water providers on the South Coast, as well as the county water agency. Even the cities of Buellton and Solvang have chipped in to help with production costs. In an area without abundant water supplies, the county's collective water purveyors use the show to encourage lightening the demands on their systems.

Ask the Garden Wise Guys what they accomplished during the last half-decade and they'll answer with trademark self-effacement. "I think we taught people how to click their remotes so they can click away from the show," jokes Goodnick. Laughs aside, they said their best indication of accomplishment has come from the viewers. "They'll tell me, 'I learned something and I was entertained.' I'm glad they say they learned something first," Goodnick said.

"We've accomplished a great deal, teaching in a fun way about water management, getting off pesticides and doing things that are environmentally appropriate," said Dell. "I think we've taught people that sustainable landscaping saves effort and money, and that it isn't just for one segment of society. Sustainable landscaping has been shown to cost about 1/5 of traditional landscaping."

Goodnick added that their light-hearted approach to their topic set them apart. "A lot of times, talking about the environment comes with a doom and gloom, Al Gore kind of message. We have a serious message, but we don't take ourselves too seriously," he said.

When asked how the show has changed, he says there's one big difference: "I can actually bear to watch the episodes now." Dell said learning the art of television was a process. "The first episodes we did were a bit of an embarrassment, but over time we learned a great deal about how to create a show like this." The production quality of the show improved as their hosting abilities and the format evolved. "One of the things I advocated for was a transition to a storyline. I'm a strong believer that people love stories and that they will pay more attention to a story." Many of the stories the wise guys told were parodies of classic shows and movies like Journey to the Center of the Earth or 60 Minutes.

When it comes to favorite episodes, they have a hard time picking just one. "They're like my children," said Dell. But he settles on an early episode that spoofed the film noir detective genera. It put the water wise guys on a deadline to design a sustainable garden for a mystery client. For Goodnick, it's the episode titled "Lawn & Order," which had the pair facing a judge for murdering too many water hungry lawns. That episode even featured a parody music video.

With busy schedules filling up, they decided to wrap up their stint on the show, but not before leaving their successors with some advice in the form of four letters: WWAD. The acronym stands for What Would Alton Do, and the Alton they are referring to is TV's Alton Brown of shows such as Good Eats and Iron Chef America. "I don't watch TV, I don't even have a TV, but once Billy brought over this tape and Alton Brown was on it. He had great energy and we thought he was a pretty good model. If one of us was ever lagging, the other one would hold up a WWAD sign-off camera," said Dell. "My advice would be to keep that energy up. Give it everything you've got when that red light is on."

Goodnick had a piece of tongue-in-cheek advice: "They damn well better get it right" he said, with a laugh before adding that the show's writers should strive to include useful content no matter what format the show took.

The person poised to receive that advice is Dana Halverson. She began working on Garden Wise Guys as a character, often playing a long-lost friend. Now she's stepping into hosting duties but still has a lot of respect for her predecessors. "I originally met (Goodnick) when I took his SBCC adult education landscape class over 10 years ago. He is a fantastic and funny teacher." She said he also helped design her own home's landscaping and inspired her love of gardening. She described Dell as down to earth, smart and funny. "I have learned so much from Billy and Owen and their past (Garden Wise Guys) episodes, and, while filming shows together, the three of us have had many laughs."

Halverson has a unique background, being both an actor and a former molecular biology research scientist with a PHD. She said her background should work well in her latest role, as gardening is both art and science. "I truly believe in the show's public education platform and its message. I am very happy and proud to participate in a show that educates local citizens on how to make simple, personal changes that help to better preserve our beautiful city as well as our larger world."

For now, the cast and crew of Garden Wise Guys are busy with lots of changes, including the name. Without the "guys" the water districts that oversee production are still working to find the right name for the new show. They are also working on deciding on a new format and most importantly, how to end Goodnick's and Dell's final appearance on the show's 18th episode.

The team behind the show isn't sure how the search for Goodnick and Dell is going to end. "I had this idea that we would cut to them sitting on a beach, where you just see the back of their heads. It would be like a Corona commercial, except instead of a beer they would have a glass of compost tea," said production supervisor Tony Ruggieri. That's just one of the ideas floating around that include everything from UFO abduction to a mysterious ending that involves garden gnomes.

Whatever the case, Goodnick assured it would be done in true Garden Wise Guys fashion. "There's going to be a real twist. It's going to reveal who we really are, sort of like LOST."

Garden Wise Guys

Find Garden Wise Guys episodes: All 17 original episodes of the show can be found online at www.sbwater.org. A selection of episodes is available at county libraries. New shows can be seen on county TV (check your provider for listings) and online.

Find Owen Dell: His website and blog are located at www.owendell.com. He also speaks locally and internationally about sustainable landscaping. He is the author of Sustainable Landscaping for Dummies and produces online videos about gardening.

Find Billy Goodnick: He writes for Fine Gardening magazine and also has a biweekly column at www.edhat.com. Goodnick is an instructor at Santa Barbara City College and hosts a Wednesday night adult education class on sustainable landscape design.

brookshire@syvjournal.com

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Tony Ruggieri directs a Garden Wise Guys segment. - Photos by Isaiah Brookshire



One of the locations in Episode 18 was Santa Barbara's city TV control room.



Dana Halverson plays the part of a news anchor in an upcoming episode.



