Saturn’s rings are ... disappearing?
A month ago, Spring began, and now, typical for Southern California, we are now entering near summer weather. But what about the headline above? Are Saturn’s rings disappearing (as was headlined a few weeks ago)? Is this a sign of summer approaching? Is this a sign of global warming?

No. While Saturn’s rings are made of ice particles, the rings themselves are not disappearing. So what’s the hoopla all about?

Saturn’s rings are not solid, but actually thousands of rings made up of billions of icy or rocky particles, as small as sugar grains or as large as a house, that orbit around the second largest planet in our solar system. While the system of rings are as wide as 282,000 km, they are only about 1 km thick. Think of looking at a piece of paper face on: it looks quite substantial. However, it looks quite thin (and dangerous, if you’ve ever received a paper cut) from the edge.

The image above shows Saturn as we normally imagine it. However, the image to the right shows Saturn as it would look seen edge on.

What happens is that Saturn’s equator is tilted 26.73° with respect to it’s orbit, slightly more than the Earth’s. Since the rings encircle the equator, they are also tilted to its orbit by the same angle. As Saturn completes its 29.4 year orbit, it’s north pole points at the same spot in space (just as the Earth points to the North Star, Polaris).

So most of the time, we see Saturn as is imaged in the picture to the left, but every 15 years or so, we see the rings of Saturn edge on.

Thus, they are not truly disappearing -- we will only get to see them edge on. Below, are simulated views of Saturn from 2001 to 2029.

What’s Up in the Sky?
Saturn! Last year while helping out the McPherson Magnet school, people joked that we had put stickers of Saturn inside the telescopes. Not true. However, one can see the rings and moons of Saturn through even a small telescope: a very striking sight.

Saturn is high in the southeast sky at dusk. Mars is also high in the sky at dusk but in the western sky. Beginning in late April, Mercury makes a rare appearance in the west-northwest shortly after sunset. It will look like the evening star. Remember, planets are usually bright and do not twinkle.