



Downsize the Lawn with an Herb and Flower Garden

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Program

Do you have a backyard with a large lawn? Is your landscape looking a little tired and ready for a facelift? Why not convert a portion of lawn into an herb and flower garden? You can create a functional yet artistic design by cutting out large portions of turf. You can even keep strips of lawn within the design to serve as pathways between the planted areas.

Any site can become an herb and flower garden. Garden styles and layouts are as varied as the people who grow and use them. They can be as small or as large as space permits. Herbs can be tucked into existing flower borders, vegetable beds, or decorative pots. When more space is available a separate area set aside specifically for herbs often becomes a special place for a peaceful respite from the day's chores.

- 1) Analyze your sprinklers. If your lawn's sprinkler system runs on more than one valve and you wish to keep an undisturbed lawn area, then design the herb garden so it uses one valve and the lawn uses the second valve. The herbs and flowers will need less frequent watering than the lawn.
- 2) Make sure the area receives 6-8 hours of sun all year round. Many aromatic herbs are Mediterranean in origin, which works out perfectly for us in the Central Valley, since we mimic this climate.
- 3) Think about some designs that would work in your area. Sometimes a geometric design like a square, diamond, circle or triangle in the center works, but then some backyards lend themselves to a meandering freeform that takes them to other parts of the yard.
- 4) Sketch a few ideas on paper then go outside and outline your designs in the lawn with hoses to get an idea of where to cut out the lawn. A fescue lawn is easier to convert than a bermuda lawn, since it is easier to slice into and remove the roots. Bermuda lawns will need extra work to remove the runners (you may wish to help the process along with herbicides). Lawn bits and pieces can be piled up and composted or recycled in the greenwaste.
- 5) Lawn paths should be 24-36" wide so you can easily walk



Herb garden 2



Herb garden 4

between planted areas and still be easy to mow. For convenient access to the herbs and flowers, plant within 3 feet from the path or consider placing some stepping stones in larger plots.

- 6) Take time to prepare the planting beds. Amend the soil with compost and organic matter and let it set for a few

weeks. Fall is the best time of year to plant many herbaceous perennials. We proclaim October to be the best planting month of the year, but you can begin as early as Labor Day when the days become a little shorter and the nights are a little cooler.



Herb garden 5

- 7) Use tall plants as focal points in central beds or as screens. Position annual plants so you don't have to disturb perennials when planting, clipping, or harvesting them. Plant lists are abundant (visit the MG website for our herb and flower garden samplers) and nurseries are chock full of herbaceous annual and perennials, just be sure that they are adapted and thrive in our area.
- 8) Where you have space, group several plants of the same species together to increase their effect. It's easy to want to overplant young seedlings for a more instant full effect, but resist the urge and instead lay mulch around the widely spaced plants. Most flowers and herbs are exuberant growers and besides the aromatic or culinary benefits these plants provide, appreciating their natural shape is additional beauty to behold.
- 9) Consider adding garden artifacts such as fountains, bird baths, bird houses, chimes, lath screens or arbors, statuary, and of course a bench or sitting area that beckons you in for a rest.
- 10) Initially your new plants will need frequent watering to get established, but then the winter rains will come and root systems will develop naturally. You will need to care for your gardens, but weekly maintenance and water usage should be less than a traditional lawn. Happy gardening!

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