

Tahoe Friendly Lawn Alternatives

Kathleen Maston, Master Gardener

Planning Decisions

Redesigning the space formerly occupied by your lawn involves a series of decisions. A good way to start the process is to ask yourself what you want to do in your new garden space. Will it be only for visual interest? Do you need a space for children or pets, relaxing or entertaining, growing vegetables? Your new garden may combine several of these functions.

Depending on how you intend to use your space, you need to decide what kind of hardscape features you want to include. If you will be using the space actively, how will you move around in the garden and connect the spaces? Will you use paths? Where will they be? Will you add a deck or space for seating? If your property is sloped, will you add steps or retaining walls? For visual interest, will you add features such as a dry or wet streambed?

Once you have decided how you want to use your garden space, use a simple technique to analyze the features and exposures of your site. Based on sun exposure and water needs you can divide the space into four categories:

- Sun/low water
- Sun/moderate water
- Shade/low water
- Shade/moderate water

Benefits of Lawn Conversion

- Lower water use and no run off
- Lower maintenance
- Less landfill waste and fewer carbon emissions
- No chemical/synthetic fertilizers or pesticides

Design Alternatives

Sun/Low Water

Alpine Rock Garden

An alpine rock garden features the use of boulders, rocks, stones, cobbles, gravels, pebbles, and sand. The boulders and rocks form a dramatic backdrop for signature native alpine plants of the Sierras, and particularly for native and adapted succulents. The topography is central to the design, often including mounds, berms, and outcrops. If you import rocks, using native rock fits in better with the overall look and feel of the Tahoe Basin. The arrangement of the rocks must be carefully planned and one-half to one-third buried for a natural appearance.

The most important design consideration is that the plants look good with the rocks. For this reason, most successful rock gardens use plants that are small or moderate in size. They feature herbaceous perennials, small succulents, and sub-shrubs that enhance but do not overpower the rocks. They can feature mass plantings of a few types of plants, or a wide range of different plants, which makes this a great choice for plant collectors. Another major advantage is very low water use. However, unless you already have boulders on your property, alpine gardens can be expensive to install in terms of time, labor, equipment and materials.

Plant Suggestions

CN=California Natives A=Adapted

Alpine Rock Garden



- *Berberis repens*, Creeping Barberry (CN)
- *Eriogonum umbellatum*, Sulfer Buckwheat (CN)
- *Penstemon newberryi*, Mountain Pride (CN)
- *Zauschneria californica*, California Fuschia (CN)

Succulent Garden

A succulent garden is similar to an alpine rock garden, but the main focus is the plants themselves, and may have a higher profile. Succulents are plants with thickened, fleshy, or leathery leaves and/or stems. The majority of succulents are non-native adapted to high elevations. They vary in size from ground covers, such as the familiar Hen and Chicks and low-growing sedums, to large and dramatic specimens, such as Yucca. Their foliage is visually striking in form and color and is the main focus of this garden style.

Succulents can be used in both formal and naturalistic designs. They can be effectively combined with xeric grasses, or low mounding plants. In terms of design, it is better to use fewer types of succulents and mass them for dramatic effect.

Succulents need well-drained soils, and adapt well to un-amended Tahoe decomposed granite. To assure good drainage, succulent gardens often have similar features to rock gardens: slopes, berms and mounds.

Sun/Moderate Water

Native Grasses

A sweep of native grasses, sedge, or other grass-like types of plants can provide an area accessible to various degrees of foot traffic and perform most of the functions of a lawn. However, it has the advantage of requiring less water, fertilizer, and other chemicals. Some native grasses can be trimmed into a short, dense mat, with a more formal appearance similar to that of a manicured lawn, or they can be left as an informal, naturalistic and low-maintenance landscape feature, that replicates a native grassland.

Like a lawn, native grasses can provide contrast to colorful flower beds or shrub borders. A native grass area cools down the reflective surfaces of sidewalks, walls, and driveways. Critical for us as environmental stewards in the Tahoe Basin, a swath of native grass has a great capacity to absorb water run-off from impermeable surfaces such as roofs, and driveways. In rainstorms, a native grass area can serve as a bioswale, slowing and filtering run-off.

Meadow

A meadow is kind of grassland composed of grasses and sedges, but also including a colorful array of annual and perennial wildflowers and bulbs. Unlike native grasses, many meadow plants will not support foot traffic, so a meadow would not be a good choice for places where there will be lot of activity that requires the resilience of turf.

A meadow is naturalistic and informal. It is visually interesting with a variety of colors and textures. It attracts native butterflies, birds, and beneficial insects. It also integrates well with the meadows in and around Tahoe. A meadow can be framed by a backdrop of bolder shrubs and trees, a fence, or a wall, and enhanced by use of informal paths, or a dry stream bed. It can be installed by: seeds, plugs, 4" or one gallon container-grown perennials, or a combination of all three.

Plant Suggestions

Succulent Garden



- *Agave parryi*, Artichoke Agave (A)
- *Hesperaloe parviflora*, Red Yucca (A)
- *Sedum spathulifolium*, Pacific Stonecrop (CN)
- *Sedum cultivars* (A)

Native Grasses



- *Bouteloua curtipendula*, side-oats grama
- *Bouteloua gracilis*, blue grama
- *Carex praegracilis*, clustered field sedge
- *Carex subfusca*, mountain sedge
- *Deschampsia cespitosa*, tufted hair grass
- *Festuca idahoensis*, Idaho fescue
- *Festuca rubra* and cultivars, red fescue

Meadow



- *Achillea 'Moonshine'*, Moonshine Yarrow (A) and other native and adapted cultivars
- *Aquilegia Formosa*, Western Columbine (CN)
- *Echinacea purpurea*, Purple Coneflower (A)
- *Linum lewisii*, Blue Flax (CN)
- *Lupinus polyphyllus*, Bog Lupine (CN) and adapted Lupine cultivars
- Native annual wildflowers

However, appreciating a meadow as part of your garden space requires being comfortable with the natural process of some plants blooming while some are dormant. In addition, a meadow requires seasonal maintenance: it needs to be cut back, or mowed in late summer or fall.

Carpets and Tapestry Gardens

These garden styles have in common the use of low-profile, water-conserving plants, many of which are considered ground covers.

A carpet garden consists of broad drifts of one or a few types of plants that create a fairly uniform or carpet-like appearance. Generally, it is not suitable for heavy activity, but there are many “steppable” ground covers that can withstand some degree of foot traffic.

A tapestry garden covers a wide range of planting combinations, chosen for aesthetic effect and ecological compatibility. It may contain plants of several heights. Great examples can be seen on hikes into the mountains surrounding Tahoe.

The key to designing a tapestry garden is choosing plants that are well-adapted to this climate zone, the site, and each other. For example, some plants grow more rapidly and may out-compete others. A tapestry garden can be simple or complex, using from two to five different types of plants woven together in an appealing combination based on color, texture, and height.

Shade/Low Water

Under-story garden

An under-story garden consists of shrubs and herbaceous perennials that grow under a canopy of trees. Plants in an under-story garden must tolerate shade and often, root competition from trees. Root competition often requires the use of perennials and shrubs with a shallow root system, e.g. less than one to two feet deep.

From an aesthetic point of view, most shade-loving perennials and small shrubs do not have brilliantly colorful flowers, but rely on contrasts in foliage texture, shape, and color to create visual interest. Choosing a plant palette that accents the tree’s bark, or leaf color, or its flowers or fruits, can create colorful combinations that are visually attractive. Many native and adapted shrubs, perennials and bulbs fit into this category and are found naturally growing on the forest floor in the Tahoe Basin. Many water-thrifty shade to partial shade-loving grasses and some succulents also grow successfully in an under-story garden.

Woodland Garden

A woodland garden has all the characteristics of an under-story garden, with the addition of water. In nature, woodland gardens are often found along streams or at the edges of wet meadows. If you have a location that is shady and moist, or if you are willing to water moderately, there is also a wide selection of blooming shade-loving plants, both native and adapted.

A woodland garden works well for a shady seating area. A water feature, such as a fountain, stream, or pond, can add interest. Many taller moist-shade plants can add a backdrop, separating the woodland garden from other areas.

Plant Suggestions

Carpet Garden



- *Arctostaphylos 'uva-ursi'*, Bearberry (CN)
- *Cerastium tomentosum*, Snow in Summer (A)
- *Phlox subulata*, Creeping Phlox (A)
- *Potentilla neumanniana 'nana'*, Creeping Cinquefoil (A)
- *Thymus serpyllum*, Creeping Thyme (A)

Tapestry Garden



- *Artemisia 'Powis Castle'* (A)
- *Geranium* cultivars (A)
- *Nepeta faassenii*, Catmint (A)
- *Salvia nemerosa*, 'East Friesland', 'East Friesland' Sage (A)

Understory Garden

- *Mahonia aquifolium*, Oregon Grape (CN)
- *Ribes roezlii*, Sierra Gooseberry (CN)
- *Ribes nevadense*, Sierra Current (CN)
- *Symphoricarpos mollis*, Creeping Snowberry (CN)

Woodland Garden



- *Aconitum columbianum* (CN) or *Aconitum nepellum* (A), Monkshood
- *Gallium odoratum*, Sweet Woodruff (A)
- *Polemonium occidentale*, Jacob's Ladder (CN) and adapted cultivars
- *Rosa woodsii*, Wood's Rose (CN)
- *Rubus parviflorus*, Thimbleberry (CN)