

## Killing Your Lawn (On Purpose)

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What is this love affair we have with our lawns? Part of every weekend is spent mowing them while others pay a landscaping service to do the chore. We weed and edge and blow. We add chemicals that pollute our water. The dandelions and other weeds come back stronger than before. And still our lawns require more of our time and money – often a lot more.

Enormous amounts of water are used to irrigate our lawns. And because the grass is often severely compacted, many lawns act like paved driveways from which a lot of water simply runs off. Even when properly maintained, our lawns' root systems are relatively shallow. Plants with deeper root systems contribute to healthier soil. And the healthier the soil, the more water it can absorb in the first place.

If you live on a cul-de-sac where nearly every house boasts a well-tended front lawn, giving up grass might be seen as subversive. But you can gradually shift toward a front yard that's more garden than lawn by creating deep, curved planting beds along the front and sides of your home. (Or be stealthy and begin with the back.) Plants with drip irrigation use less water and do so more efficiently. Shrubs such as red osier dogwood, common spicebush and viburnum can be planted in mulch outside of a home office or kitchen window. Add a birdbath and wildlife will bring a smile and help distract you from life's more mundane chores.

I used to love my lawn. It was a place for the dogs to frolic and feel that lovely cool grass between my toes with an afternoon glass of tea. I justified the expense because we have well water from natural springs. But the drought of the past few years, the long range forecast of drier ones yet to come and the harsh reality that California as a whole continues to draw down its aquifer has helped me rethink and focus on community. A grass-free lawn also helps create defensible space in the event of fire. As an added bonus, it removes a lot of pollen for allergy sufferers.

Should your imagination be running toward mulched beds with native plants, more of a xeriscape or just plain saving on your water bill, here are some tried and true methods to kill your lawn - on purpose. (If you're a renter or belong to an HOA, naturally check with your landlord or association first. You might let your neighbors in on what you're planning as well.)

### **Dig it out**

You could rent a turf cutter for the weekend and physically rip out your lawn. But aside from the obvious physical labor, grass can be very difficult to kill or contain. Be aware you're bound to miss a few roots that will find their way back with adequate sun and rain. Digging it out with a cutter or shovel works fine for smaller areas but don't rototill. Rototilling destroys the healthy soil life and plants more grass in the process.

### **Poison it**

You could spray your entire lawn with a non-selective herbicide like glyphosate or a grass herbicide such as fluazifop and kill it chemically, but that may also poison whatever you're immediately wanting to plant over it. The goal here is to build healthy soil so why drench it with something toxic? When using herbicides be sure to read and follow the label.

### **Pickle it**

If you prefer not to use a "traditional" chemical, you might want to consider an organic material such as vinegar. Vinegar or acetic acid has been shown to be effective as a contact herbicide. Like other herbicides, acetic acid can be purchased as an herbicide to kill weeds and other unwanted plants. Saturate the grass with it on a hot day, avoiding plants you want to keep. (The neighbors will likely think you're canning.) Wait 3-4 days and then dig it up.

### **Solarize it**

Easy to do but initially aesthetically unattractive. Cut your lawn very short, water thoroughly and cover with clear plastic sheeting that is weighed down with rocks. Don't use black cloth as it will keep the light out, necessary to kill the roots. It'll take about six weeks for the sun to do its work.

### **Smother it**

Sheet mulching is a great way to go both organically and expense-wise. Cover your lawn with five to six layers of cardboard or newspaper. Add 4-6 inches of mulch on top and water thoroughly. Wait two months. You can then dig through it and plant whatever your heart desires, cardboard and all. New plants will be able to send their roots through the decomposing cardboard as deeply as they need. This method also leaves the dead grass behind for the earthworms to enjoy, adding to the overall health of the soil.

*For more information or help with foothills gardening, call 754-2880, email [mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us](mailto:mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us) or visit [ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners](http://ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners)*