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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Time to do away with your lawn



Because lawns require lots of water, they are just not suitable for our summer-dry climate. You can remove your lawn with sheet mulching or solarization.

Question: Last summer, because of the drought, we stopped watering our lawn altogether and it turned brown. We thought it was dead. But now, after all the rain this year, the lawn is turning green again. It felt good to save water and money last summer. What can we do this year to save water and still have an attractive front yard?

Answer: The good news is that after reaching historically low levels over the past three years of severe drought, the water supply at Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma has fully recovered. However, drought continues to be an ongoing occurrence in California. We all need to adapt to our changing climate. Water we save now is water we can use later.

You don't say how large your lawn is. The amount of water your lawn needs to look good depends on the type of grass, the soil, sun exposure and weather. Here in Sonoma County, a cool-season grass, such as fescue or rye, needs at least an inch of water, or 0.62 gallons per square foot, every week. If you multiply the lawn's area by 0.62, you get the minimum amount of water your lawn needs each week.

Say your lawn is 500 square feet. Then it needs 310 gallons of water each week, and more in a dry, hot summer.

Because lawns require so much water, they are just not suitable for our summer- dry climate. For every 1,000 square feet of lawn you remove and replace with low-water-use plants, you can save 30 to 60 gallons of water each time you water.

There are two efficient and inexpensive methods you can use to remove your lawn: sheet mulching and solarization.

Sheet mulching uses a layer of cardboard or newspaper, topped with another layer of mulch, to smother the grass and weeds in your lawn. You can sheet mulch almost any time of year. This article will address sheet mulching only.

Solarization works best with high summer temperatures. There is a link to solarization instructions at the end of this article.

How to sheet mulch

To begin sheet mulching, cut your grass as short as possible one last time and don't water it. Then dig a shallow trench, about 3 inches deep and 3 inches wide, around your yard wherever the lawn comes in contact with a hard border, such as a sidewalk or driveway.

Insert landscape flags next to any working sprinkler heads, so you can find and cap them off or convert one or two to drip irrigation.

Cover every inch of your lawn with cardboard or a thick layer of newspapers. You can get free cardboard from a big-box or appliance store, or you can buy it in large rolls. Remove any staples, tape or sticky labels on the cardboard.

As you lay it over your lawn, overlap the cardboard edges by 6 to 8 inches to make sure nothing underneath can grow up through gaps. At the edges of the lawn, fold the cardboard or paper down into the trench you dug earlier, to completely shut out sunlight. You can sprinkle the paper with a little water to encourage it to decompose and make it easier to bend into the trench.

If you have soil that has been depleted or compacted over the years, or if you are in a hurry to plant new plants, cover the cardboard with 1 to 2 inches of compost. You can cut a small hole in the cardboard and put new plants directly into the compost, then water them thoroughly. We always recommend you plant new plants in the fall, when cooler temperatures and winter rains reduce the amount of water your new plants need to survive.

On top of the layers of paper and compost, add a layer of 3 to 4 inches of wood-chip mulch. If you have trees in the lawn area, be sure to keep the mulch 3 to 6 inches away from their trunks, to prevent moisture from rotting the crown.

Over time, the paper and dying vegetation it covers decompose and turn into rich soil. If you sheet mulch during a hot summer, water the layers once a month to encourage decomposition.

You may get a rebate

When you sheet mulch, remember to create defensible space against wildfires in the first 5 feet surrounding your home and attached decks. Avoid putting anything combustible in that area, including woody plants, mulch, combustible trellises and stored items.

Your city may offer a “cash for grass” rebate in which homeowners receive money for removing up to 1,000 square feet of grass. Other cities give away free mulch. These programs usually require an inspection of your lawn before you begin removal. Check your city’s website for details.

After you finish laying down the sheet mulch, you can start thinking about what to plant in your yard. Plant drought-tolerant California natives as well as low-water use plants that grow in Mediterranean climates. For a free consultation on plants and irrigation, schedule a Garden Sense visit from Sonoma County Master Gardeners.

For more information, check out these resources:

- Soil solarization for gardens and landscapes: <https://bit.ly/3Zqxx9b>
- Current drought conditions for Sonoma County: <https://bit.ly/3L22pbv>
- Sonoma County rebate programs: <https://bit.ly/3ZNmgjK>
- Plants for lawn replacement: <https://bit.ly/3Jj7bAg>
- Save water around the yard: <https://bit.ly/40nsOFm>
- Water-smart plant picker: <https://bit.ly/3JkQVyN>
- Sonoma County Garden Sense: <https://bit.ly/3T95vwJ>

Contributors to this week’s column are Karen Felker, Patricia Rosales and Rob Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at [707565-2608](tel:707565-2608) or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.