



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

TO BE OR NOT TO BE: THE AMERICAN LAWN

By Tish Grenfell, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I know that a lot of people are tearing out their lawn. Should I do that, and, if so, what can I plant instead?

A First, examine your reasons for having a lawn. Grass can be difficult, needing plentiful water, fertilizer, weed killers, pesticides, and precious time/expensive gas to mow it. And the price you pay for having that lawn is far more than the \$\$ leaving your wallet. Our overtreated, overwatered, oversized lawns, once considered an American icon demanding perfection and conformity, are taking a toll on our clean air and waterways, our own health (and that of our pets), potable water supply, soil health, beneficial insects, and the drought tolerance of turf grasses.

Where they aren't needed for recreation, lawns can be replaced with any mixture of trees, shrubs, and perennials, even edibles, and all of those can be beautiful. Or if you feel you can't do without the look of manicured grass, reduce it in size to a patch to anchor the garden beds.

Or replace your lawn with low maintenance turfgrasses such as the vigorous buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides* 'UC Verde') or fine fescue mixes such as red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) or sheep fescue (*F. ovina* var. *duriuscula*). Unmowed, the 8-12" fescue stems bend over to make a carpet 5-6" high.

If you must keep your lawn, you can reduce the environmental impact by adopting organic practices. That means using organic, slow-release fertilizers, de-thatching & aerating, applying only pre-emergent weed killer, avoiding frequent and shallow irrigation, leaving clippings on the lawn, and mowing at a higher setting. Better yet, use a hand mower and apply a light topcoat of compost.

References:

The UC Guide to Healthy Lawns
<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/TOOLS/TURF/index.html>

Lawn Reform Coalition
<http://www.lawnreform.org/why-lawn-reform.html>

Brooklyn Botanical Garden /Low and Slow Fescues
<http://www.bbg.org/search/search&keywords=low%20and%20slow%20fescues&x=23&y=10/>

UC Davis College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences: UC Verde Buffalograss
<http://ccuh.ucdavis.edu/projects/uc-verde-buffalograss/uc-verde-buffalograss>

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