

## In Defense of Lawns

A recent trend in landscape design is the elimination of the front lawn. Instead of the familiar swath of green, these "new age" designs substitute a variety of ornamental grasses, perennials, shrubs and trees. When designed well, on a large lot in a setting where the neighboring properties don't establish a strong context, the effect can be interesting and even spectacular! In the typical urban setting, however, it is just as likely to produce a look that has too much in common with weed-strewn vacant lots or overgrown vegetable gardens. That's a long way from the intended impact, and could result in unhappy neighbors and even lowered property values!

What bothers me most about these "lawn free" designs is that they're often presented with a religious fervor, as if there were something wrong, even unpatriotic, about turf grass. As a landscape designer, however, I still love turf grass and believe that in most cases it is essential, especially in the front yards of our smaller urban lots.

There is no plant material more versatile and architecturally compatible than grass. In my opinion, most examples of successful residential design incorporate a lawn, as well as perennial beds, shade trees, and other landscaping design features such as pathways and focal points.

Admittedly, we live geographically in a desert-like environment, and "xeriscaping" (design for desert-like conditions) is generally incompatible with turf grass. Xeriscaping by itself, however, isn't the ultimate landscape theme to be embraced by everyone in our region under all circumstances.

In fact, from a functional and aesthetic standpoint, xeriscaping often has significantly more disadvantages than advantages. It hardly seems necessary to

itemize the advantages that turf grass brings to our home sites: from the versatility of a surface that can be used for play as well as a simple, green, visual carpet, to the integrating effect of lawns running from property to property, enhancing the streetscape and sense of community. To me, the pluses of lawns seem to outweigh the negatives. Let's take a look at some of the negatives cited in the debate over turf grass:

*What about the high maintenance of lawns?*

An interesting study published recently in *American Nurseryman Magazine* compared the real life maintenance of lawns with alternatives such as ground cover and perennial and shrub plantings. Lawns turned out to be lower in maintenance than almost any other alternative. For a typical 50 foot wide lot, it costs as little as \$40.00 a month to have turf areas professionally maintained on a weekly basis.

*What about water usage?*

Turf grass does need more water than a xeriscape composed of plants like juniper, rosemary, and ornamental grasses. But if you really want to save water, how about gravel, asphalt or even dead grass? You get my point: water usage is *not* the most essential element of landscape design. Beauty is far more significant! In my experience, the water requirements of typical "green" landscape treatments such as shrub beds and ground cover areas are not that dramatically different, especially if you're maintaining the

lush, green look that our hot summers seem to demand to offset what could be a bleak and gray setting.

Although blue grass is still thought of by many people as the ultimate lawn, in Sacramento it's clear that the ultimate lawn for you is more likely to be a *dwarf fescue*. These fescues require less water and maintenance, are more traffic tolerant, more

pest and disease free, and are all around better performers! In conclusion, if you're redoing your landscape don't be brow beaten into giving up turf grass. I believe its advantages outweigh its disadvantages, and with the right turf choice, you'll be able to enjoy the many features of your lawn "guilt free!"

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