

When it comes to lawns.....

just say NO!



It wasn't until the end of the 19th century after the invention of the rotary lawn mower and the development of seed mixes that would perform in this country that the average American was able to replicate the lawns of large English estates. In fact, the word 'lawn' originally meant an area of meadow that was grazed short by livestock and early European lawns were made up of such plants as thyme, chamomile and clover, not grass. It wasn't until the American Garden Club instituted a contest in the early part of the 20th century to see who in America could grow the best lawn that the front lawn became a fixture of American life. And for most Americans, the lawn is still the single biggest part of our landscaping. A recent NASA-sponsored study found that approximately 32 million acres of land in the US is covered by lawn, making it the largest single irrigated crop by area.

And to keep that lawn green and weed-free, Americans spent nearly \$30 billion in 2002 on lawn care services, an average annual cost of \$1200 per household. In addition, a large percentage of our water usage goes to watering our lawns. In fact, it has been estimated that between 50% and 70% of all residential water use is for landscaping, primarily for lawns. A 1000 square foot lawn uses between 25,000 and 40,000 gallons of water per year. This is one major reason why water agencies throughout California are asking homeowners to reduce or eliminate the amount of landscape devoted to lawn. That's not to say there isn't an important role for lawns in our gardens. Everyone with children knows it is the easiest play surface. And it also provides a wonderful area for entertaining. But if we can just reduce the amount of area devoted to lawn by 25%, we can reduce the amount of water we use to irrigate our lawns, we could reduce our total water use by 100 million to 150 million gallons a year. That's a lot of water!

Another point to consider is that lawns are mono-cultures. That means there is not a mix of plants providing food and nectar sources for all sorts of beneficial insects and critters that in turn take care of the pests that destroy our food crops and our ornamental flowering plants. In order to support this mono-culture, we often have to resort to herbicides and pesticides which eventually end up in our water supplies and our food chain.

One option is to replace some or all of our lawns with alternative ground covers.....either very drought-tolerant grasses mixed with wildflowers, as you see in the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden at the Sonoma County Fair, or with groundcover materials such as ceanothus, manzanitas, and thyme. Which option we choose largely depends on the amount of foot-traffic that is intended. If you are planning on using the space as a play area, it makes sense to use a drought tolerant grass such as carex pansa (California Meadow Sedge) or festuca ovina (Sheep Fescue) mixed with chamaemelum nobile (Chamomile), trifolium pretense (Red Clover) and thymus praecox (Creeping Thyme). Not only will it smell fantastic every time you walk on it,

but the herbs will serve as a food source for the insects that will help keep your garden healthy without the use of pesticides. And the dense mat of bunch grasses and herbs will reduce the number of weeds.

However, if the area is, for example, a front yard, which is rarely, if ever, used for recreation, then there are a tremendous number of options available. In fact, this could provide a wonderful opportunity to create a really eye-popping design with masses of groundcover shrubs and tall bunch grasses or lavender blowing in the breezes instead of a bare expanse of lawn with a row of shrubs around the foundation of the house. And with a number of cities offering 'cash for grass' programs, you can actually get paid for replacing your turf lawn with drought tolerant plants. Check with your city water department to see if there is a program in your area. As of July, 2009, there are programs in Cotati, Santa Rosa, Sonoma and Windsor as well as in the Valley of the Moon Water District. In addition, the North Marin Water Agency is offering a program. But even if your town isn't offering a rebate program, consider replacing part or all of your lawn with drought tolerant plants. You will save on your water bills and, depending on the plants you choose, you could find that it's a lot less work to take care of, too.