



TREEPEOPLE

sustainable solutions

growing a greener city

october 2010 · removing grass · out-of-the-box · plant of the month · cash for grass

The Grass Is Not Always Greener



"I get more pleasure from growing fruits and vegetables in my back yard than grass. For less water and more pleasure I can grow peppers, butternut squash, tomatoes, and more herbs than I know what to do with. It's exciting, seasonal and now my daughters' favorite thing to do is pick vegetables and make friends with the worms."

- Neil Fraser, Chef

Why do we love our lawns when they don't love us back? We pay a gardener or mow every week. We weed, edge and blow... all which cause noise and air pollution. We aerate and add chemicals that pollute our waterways. And still, they need more. A lot more. More than half of our potable water is used to irrigate our landscapes. And what do we get in return? Not much. Most turf and the soil under it are severely compacted, so it acts like a paved surface, creating runoff. Even under the best conditions, the root system for turf is very shallow. Plants with deeper root systems allow for a possibility of a greater amount of healthy soil. The healthier our soil, the more water it can absorb, so less runoff.

Even so, I used to love my lawn! It was so perfect: a thick soft carpet for my kids and puppy to romp about, surrounded by a white picket fence. Then I found out the dirty truth about how turf lawns do not belong in a Mediterranean climate. And the simple fact was that my children and dog spent most of their time in the flower beds anyway. So I did it: I killed my lawn.

Here are a few different ways to commit herbicide!

1. Sweat it out (works best late spring/ summer)

Solarizing is easy, although slightly unattractive for a short while.

- Cut your lawn very short.
- Water thoroughly.
- Cover with plastic sheeting. Stake or weigh down with bricks/stones.
- Wait 6 weeks for the sun to do the dirty work.

2. Cover it up

Sheet Mulching is a great way to go. if you have small children. It's fairly cheap and easy.

- Cover your lawn with about 6 layers of cardboard or newspaper.
- Add 4-6" of mulch on top. Most municipalities offer mulch for free.
- Water.
- Wait 2 months. Then you can dig through, and plant whatever you like; cardboard and all.

3. Dig it

Good old fashioned elbow grease. This takes a long time and can often remove too much top soil. But it's okay for small areas. Do not just rototill... not only are you disturbing the soil life, you'll plant more grass. Grass grows from the stems, so you must get out the entire plant and root system.

4. Use vinegar

Some folks swear by chemicals. I'm not a big fan. We're trying to build healthy soil, so drenching your garden in something toxic seems counterintuitive to me. However, if spraying seems like the only option for you, try vinegar. (Not effective on Bermuda grass.)

- Saturate the grass with vinegar.
- It works best on hot days.
- Avoid spraying plants you want to keep.
- Wait 2-4 days. Then dig up.

Continued on page 2

TreePeople's Sustainable Solutions Program is dedicated to landscape transformation - turning yards into functional landscapes that are beautiful and sustainable. Our monthly guides and checklists detail an easy, step-by-step process, helping us all create a healthy urban forest where water is valued, air is clean, soil is healthy and trees are thriving.

Next Month: Native & Climate Appropriate Plants

Linda's List

Linda Eremita, TreePeople's Senior ISA Certified Arborist, has the following suggestions for your October gardening fun:

Climate Appropriate Plant of the Month

Deer Grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*)

Deer grass is a striking and easy to maintain native grass. Its long, slender grey-green leaves turn a tawny brown in fall. It can grow to 5' tall and 6' wide, resembling a spraying fountain. Let it be or every few years, cut it back in May for a flush of fresh growth. If it out-grows its space, divide it in late fall through winter. Plant the new sections elsewhere, or pot them up for friends. Now that's a sustainable gift for the holidays!

Upcoming Workshop

December 12, 2010 - Pruning Workshop

Visit www.treepeople.org



Photo courtesy of Juan Villegas

Out-of-the-Box

Parks Go Green

TreePeople's partner, Los Angeles City Recreation and Parks Department, will eliminate 220,000 square feet of turf by June 2013. Under their Strategic Water Conservation Plan they will increase the use of mulch in our city parks. They hope this will reduce the amount of water needed for irrigation.

The plan notes the many benefits of mulch, that "it reduces water usage by moderating fluctuation of soil temperature and by slowing evaporation rates. Mulch, both organic (bark and other tree by-products) and inorganic groundcovers (decomposed granite, pebbles, stones)... function as paving material for pathways and as aesthetic opportunities in the landscape. Mulch reduces erosion by slowing the flow of surface water... where reduction of flow rates improves groundwater infiltration and pollutant removal." Additionally, RAP currently diverts over 90% of their green waste from landfills turning it into useful mulch.

How can you help?

Go to a TreePeople tree care event in one of our local parks. It's a great way to meet people, burn a few calories and give some TLC to our earth.

6. What should I plant instead? Create a new aesthetic!

Aren't we lucky to live in SoCal? We can grow just about anything in our lovely Mediterranean climate. So how about that veggie garden you've always wanted? You can also choose one big flower bed of natives and climate-appropriate plants (see next month's issue!) Or if it just seems too drastic to kill your entire lawn, consider just shrinking it a bit.

What about artificial turf? Fake grass is, well, fake. And it's not a very green choice. It may be made of recycled materials and doesn't require water to grow, but these surfaces get very hot (adding to the heat island effect) and often require water to cool them.

As stewards of our environment, we want to choose landscapes that conserve water and promote healthy soil. Choose a turf alternative instead like Carex or Dymondia.

Having a grassy field around your home seems harmless. However, a 1,000-square-foot lawn with a typical irrigation system will use 25,000 gallons of water per year. Replace it with low-water plants and you're down to 6,000 gallons.

If your neighborhood is like mine, most people don't really use their yards, especially front yards. While turf offers a nice playing surface, if it's not being used as such, why not turn it into something that takes less and gives more? Bouquet of lavender or organic veggies anyone?



Photo courtesy of Irma Raciti

Cash For Grass - a Department of Water & Power Program

Have you heard? You can get \$1 or more per square foot for removing turf.

Call 1-888-376-3314 or www.socalwatersmart.com, click on "Turf Removal Page." Your application must be approved before you start work. You have 120 days to complete your project and then kick back and wait for your check to arrive.