

Ditching your lawn? Plan replacement carefully

Mary Ellen Hunt, Special to The Chronicle

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Estimates vary, but those lush, green turf grass lawns can account for 50 to 80 percent of a household's yearly water usage - adding up to thousands of gallons of water per acre of lawn.

Conserving the copious amounts of water that thirsty lawns suck up has become such a priority that counties from Marin to Santa Clara are offering homeowners rebates for removing their lawns. Even small businesses are offering incentives, such as the Ploughshares Nursery's "Tear Out Your Lawn" challenge in which customers can get 20 percent off drought-tolerant plants

through May 31 if they remove 40 percent of their lawns.

If you're tempted to take out the turf grass, you're not alone. Susan Morrison of Creative Exteriors Landscape Design in Concord notes that the last 10 clients who have contacted her have wanted to get rid of their lawns. But once you're committed to tearing out the lawn, how do you fill what used to be a vast green space? Maybe you're thinking of adding in Bay Area native, drought-tolerant plants; maybe you're thinking drip irrigation systems. Now what?

Before you even consider heading off to the plant nursery, the first step is to come up with a plan. Alma Hecht of San Francisco's Second Nature Design says it is very



important to think about how you will use the space. Will it be an outdoor entertaining space or an area where the kids or pets can romp?

Do you want to attract birds, grow flowers, have a vegetable garden? And how much care are you going to be able to give the garden on a regular basis?

"I never met someone who wanted a high-maintenance garden," laughs Hecht, at the shady Vine and Dine garden she created as an oasis for San Francisco gourmets.

Although the space isn't expansive, Hecht co-mingles dining, lounging and working areas with an eye toward creating a meander through the garden punctuated by stand-alone sculptural pieces.



Bees lazily buzz around the flowers as the shadows on a windbreak wall shift from late afternoon to evening. A concrete divider filled with stacked recycled wine bottles marks off a dining area that features a mosaic table Hecht designed herself.

A small cutting garden offers a place to putter, and a path lined with chamomile-framed flagstones leads under a sculpted pergola into a quiet conversation area. And because the wind whips down the driveway leading to the garden, a recirculating wall fountain also serves to shield guests who can relax around the fire pit next to the water.

A fountain might sound like a surprising addition when you're thinking water conservation, but even though recirculating fountains lose some water to evaporation



and splash-out - the East Bay Municipal Utility District estimates that about 1 to 4 gallons per square foot of water per year gets lost to evaporation from pools - it still uses a lot less than the water lost to a large turf grass lawn, and the pleasure that people take in the sound of water can be well worth the trade-off.

In fact, a stunning free-standing water wall is the focal point of the garden that Alameda garden designer and builder Shirley Watts designed for Karen Evind. With a background in fine arts, Watts confesses to a love for collage effects, and her designs often

incorporate elements of found art, which she calls foraged urban archaeology.

In a yard shaded by existing trees, Watts created a cool space divided into manageable areas by multiple levels of patio and beds centered around the impressive and attractive



semi-transparent sheet of water, whose lines echo the oversize panels made of repurposed vinyl billboards that she used to replace portions of the property's fence.

"I think one of them was from 'Lord of the Rings' and it had a giant picture of Orlando Bloom on it," she laughs, "but truly, the graphic design on these billboards is

wonderful and the light just comes through them like a curtain."

For most designers, one solution to the problem of what to do with a large open space is to find interesting ways to divide it.

"The thing is that the lawn is the ultimate visual unifier, so you want to create that sense of connectedness in other ways," says Morrison, whose blog, garden-chick.

typepad.com, features categories like "We don't need no stinkin' lawn."

"You can become so overwhelmed at redoing a whole garden," says Morrison, who encourages thinking about such a space the same way one might consider an interior.

"You still want unity, but sometimes it's easier, less daunting, to think of it as a series of interconnected rooms."

Morrison's European stroll garden features a tiled path that connects the garden to the home, leading on a multilevel path through formal planted beds to a striking sculptural fountain. But, she notes, even a long curving racetrack design could turn a small yard into an interesting run space for pets, or a play area for kids to ride the tricycle in, or play games.

"Dogs love to walk a circuit, and you can make the path more interesting by incorporating raised berms which can dramatically improve the drainage, especially for low water plants," says Morrison. "You can create raised beds for butterfly gardens, or vegetable gardens, which are great for kids and adults.

"The pathway idea gives people a reason to move through the garden, so that they have a place to go," says Morrison, "but it also sends the message that it's a place to move through, because your eye naturally moves through it. But ultimately, you want to remember that you're outside, and that people really like to feel that they're outside - the air, the plants and the sound of water are all so important to that sense."

The original photographs have been replaced with images of Second Nature Design's.

resources

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-- East Bay Municipal Utility District: www.ebmud.com

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*<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/04/17/BASQ16SI8P.DTL>
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