



Beautiful concrete-edged "floating" lawns connected by bridges over beds of rain lilies (*Zephyranthes candida*), designed by Sally McLeay, installed and maintained by Second Nature.

PHOTOS: GARDEN ARTISTRY

DO YOU NEED A LAWN?

Dianne Bellamy looks at the environmental impact of turf lawns and offers creative low-maintenance alternatives.

A well-maintained lawn is beautiful. It is a perfect green carpet that provides a restful visual contrast to the multitude of colours and textures within a garden. A lawn is also a perfect place to play and an easy way to explore a garden. In small, suburban gardens the loveliest lawns are ovals or squares of verdant green, edged with stone or concrete (see photos 1 and 2). However, a quality, fine turf lawn is a high-maintenance luxury. It requires regular mowing, feeding, weeding and copious amounts of water. Weeding and fertilising can consume your time, but the high usage of water and the petrol consumed by lawnmowers means lawns are not good for the environment. The use of herbicides and pesticides to attain a perfect lawn is another aspect to consider.



Lovely oval lawn, designed by Lucy Treep.



Mixed planting in a front garden, designed and installed by Rod Burnside.

California discourages lawns

Is it time to consider more environmentally friendly options? In April, in drought-ravaged California, United States, Governor Gerry Brown called for the removal of 50 million square feet (more than 4.6 million square metres) of lawn. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California is presently offering a \$2 per square foot subsidy, to residential homeowners, to remove lawns. They must replace turf with drought-tolerant plants and water-permeable, hard-landscaping materials. Front gardens are being established with low-maintenance plants, which have low-water requirements (xeriscaping). In sunny backyards, fruit trees and vegetable gardens are given priority. Water-permeable paving is used to create patios for outdoor living under shading pergolas or deciduous trees.

If our climate becomes more extreme, will such government-directed landscaping be necessary in drought prone areas of this country? Even in areas with plentiful rainfall, replacing a lawn with diverse planting, especially of flowering plants, will require less maintenance than a lawn and create a healthy ecosystem full of beneficial insects, birds and other wildlife.

Health and environmental impacts of lawns

Lawns are great places for children and pets to play. But do we consider the toxicity of herbicides and pesticides applied to lawns to kill weeds and insects? Chemicals commonly used on lawns in the USA are listed at www.beyondpesticides.org, with their potential health problems and toxicity risk to wildlife as they leak into the environment. Are they suitable to use on grass where young children and pets are potentially exposed to absorbing them through their skin or mouths, or breathing their dusts or vapours?

Lawnmowers and leaf vacuums create noise nuisance and emit high levels of carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons (VOCs) and nitrogen oxides. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) estimates that a petrol-powered lawnmower emits 11 times the air pollution of a new car for each hour of use.

Remove problem lawns

Consider removing turf from areas where it is most difficult to maintain. Why keep a lawn that is not thriving? Narrow strips of grass are difficult to mow and their proximity to hot-paved driveways or paths makes them very dry. Lawn turf struggles to survive in shady areas, especially under large trees. Do you have an area of lawn which is difficult to access with a lawnmower? Do you struggle to mow steeply sloping lawns? Do you have dry slopes on which the lawn dies every summer? Most rainfall runs off sloping lawns but, if converted to garden, plants intercept and slow the surface water, making it more easily absorbed. You may need professional advice to help choose plants that will thrive in shady places or on dry slopes, but you will create a much more attractive, easily maintained area.

Replacement options

Small sections and large houses in many new suburbs mean that front gardens are shrinking. A small front lawn serves no useful purpose other than to cover the ground. If you have lawn space at the rear of your house, or a nearby park, do you need a front lawn or any lawn at all? A lawn smaller than 16 square metres is not really a useful space. Why not consider planting the whole area in front of the house with a mix of low-maintenance ornamental grasses and shrubs? (See photo 3.)

A very modern look can be achieved by planting regularly spaced, architectural plants, as vertical accents, in a low-carpeting ground cover (see photos 4, 5 and 6). Stepping stones, surrounded with a tight mat of ground-cover plants, provide easy access to maintain planting that is not tolerant of foot traffic (see photo 7).



4. A carpet of *Coprosma* 'Poor Knights', punctuated with spoon-leaved 'Bird of Paradise' (*Strelitzia parviflora*), designed by Marg Thompson. 5. A carpet of *Coprosma* 'Hawera', punctuated with lancewoods and rocks, designed and installed by Rod Burnside. 6. A "lawn" of *Coprosma* 'Hawera', punctuated with spoon-leaved 'Bird of Paradise' (*Strelitzia parviflora*), designed and installed by Rod Burnside. 7. Mixed "lawn" planting of shade-loving ground covers, designed by Kirsten Sach of Kirsten Sach Design Ltd.