

805 LIVING

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Water, Water,
EVERYWHERE

In the Garden

By Billy Goodnick

HOW TO DRY OUT THE LAWN—ON PURPOSE

Today's water-saving landscaping techniques are all about the future.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE LAWN

As anyone who loves the sight of an emerald green lawn will attest, it isn't easy growing the icon of suburbia. Voracious webworms feast on the fescue; and inexplicable brown patches appear seemingly overnight, leading homeowners to wonder whether those crop circle believers might be right.

As a setting for recreation, lawns are indispensable. There are few alternatives that provide a durable but soft "floor" for playing with the kids or the pooch. But as a strictly ornamental bauble, lawns take their toll. The cost of mowing services, lawn products, and water are nothing to sneeze at (unless you're allergic to grass pollen). Reducing the size of an existing lawn—or removing it completely—will not only save money but goes a long way toward preserving water for the future.

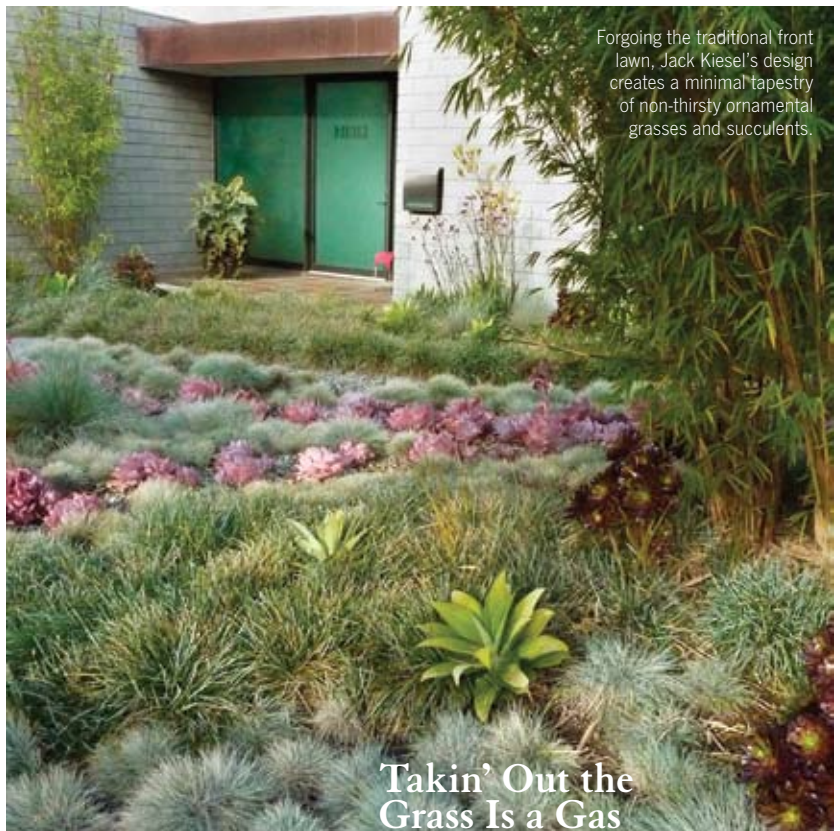
The Calleguas Municipal Water District is the wholesaler to 22 water purveyors in Ventura County. Eric Bergh, acting general manager of resources, says, "We're currently storing about a three-year reserve, but since we're largely dependent on imported state water, we need to keep conservation on people's minds."

"I've always felt that our residents would comply with the campaign to reduce water use by 15 percent," says Louise Helliwell, water conservation outreach coordinator for the City of Thousand Oaks Public Works Department, speaking of the city's conservation goal.

"Rather than take a punitive approach, we educate property owners, landscaping services, and school kids about saving water indoors and out." Asked about this year's higher rainfall, Helliwell says, "We don't want people becoming complacent. It's a drop in the bucket after a five-year drought."

TRENDS

For an 805 response to the notion of water conservation, I visited Thousand Oaks resident Len Loomis, whose front lawn recently went missing somewhere near Redwood Middle School. "I've made a lot of green improvements to the house, installing two solar hot-water systems and going all out on insulation," he says as we survey his front yard while standing on his "Leave Your Carbon Footprint at the Door" mat. "We bought the house for the swimming pool when the kids were little. Now it's my place for exercise. So I ripped out



Forgoing the traditional front lawn, Jack Kiesel's design creates a minimal tapestry of non-thirsty ornamental grasses and succulents.

Takin' Out the Grass Is a Gas

Honey, I shrunk the lawn: If you need a durable garden "floor" for active recreation, narrow the lawn to the smallest practical size, manage irrigation wisely by following your water agency's guidelines, and use only organic fertilizers and pest treatments.

Switch it up: For those who just like the look of a swath of green in the yard, substitute old-school fescue with native sedge (*Carex praegracilis*) or UC Verde buffalo grass. They use 50 percent less water. Sources can be found online.

Say goodbye: Eliminate the lawn completely and replace it with colorful drought-tolerant landscaping, a shaded reading retreat, or a place to grow something to eat.

my useless front lawn and replaced it with smarter landscaping to offset water I need for the pool.”

For those toying with the idea of “lawnicide” but who fear the expense, Loomis’ \$4-per-square-foot makeover—which included turf removal, tree pruning, construction, irrigation, planting, and mulch—should put their minds to rest. Now, a diverse bird- and butterfly-friendly garden with 43 varieties of non-thirsty shrubs, perennials, and ornamental grasses has replaced thirsty fescue grass. “I love how the garden comes to life when a breeze animates the grasses,” he says, pointing to a nearby tuft of Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*).

A BOLD APPROACH

Loomis might be the pioneer in his neighborhood of “lawnlubbers,” but his undertaking is tame compared to Santa Barbara architect David VanHoy’s new front yard. “My architectural work always makes a statement. When I remodeled my house, I knew my garden would have to embody the same bold approach,” VanHoy says.

Driving down his quiet residential Mesa neighborhood street, VanHoy’s redesigned house might be mistaken for a minimalist, contemporary office building. Gray concrete block is the dominant construction material; frosted green glass provides a cool backdrop for the Pepto-pink porch chairs. VanHoy admits his design limitations: “From the outset, I knew I had to turn the garden reins over to a creative mind like Jack’s.”

Jack is Ventura-based landscape architect Jack Kiesel, for whom every project is a blend of art and ecology. Kiesel almost never designs a garden with a front lawn. “From an ecological viewpoint, irrigated lawns have no business in Southern California,” he insists. His approach to VanHoy’s front yard was “contemporary and impressionistic, using the motif of a dry stream.” The pink leaves of *Echeveria* ‘Afterglow’ mark the flow line of the imaginary creek, while three species of blue-gray grass in graduated sizes trace the banks and upland edges.

The garden has been in for three years and aside from some initial weeding has needed only minimal care. It uses about 25 percent of the water of a typical lawn-dominated yard and doesn’t need fertilizer or pesticides.

GETTING STARTED

There are plenty of resources available to help homeowners and businesses conserve water. Most local suppliers’ websites are linked to informative resources, like plant-finder software and calculators that explain when and how much to irrigate. Homeowners can also request a free water survey from their city or water company to troubleshoot water-gulping trouble spots.

Whether motivated by the practical necessity of reducing summer water bills or the desire to landscape in an earth-friendly way, now is a good time to rethink the siren song of the perfect lawn. As a sign at Thousand Oaks City Hall reads, “Your Lawn Has a Drinking Problem.” ■



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