

# L.A. at Home

DESIGN, ARCHITECTURE, GARDENS,  
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## The Dry Garden: 'Reimagining the California Lawn'

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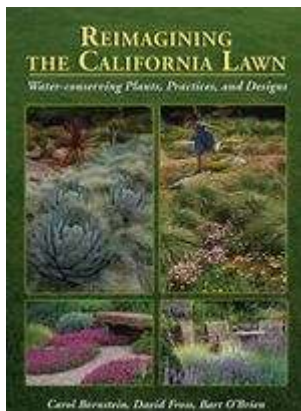
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Maybe you want to remove your lawn. Maybe you want to shrink it to make way for flowers, food plants or a shade tree. Maybe you don't know what you want. A new book written by three of California's most knowledgeable horticulturists lays out options.



It would be disingenuous to treat “[Reimagining the California Lawn: Water-Conserving Plants, Practices, and Designs](#)” like any other garden book. It's not. The authors have close to rock-star status in California horticulture, something they possessed even before the publication of their first book in 2005, “[California Native Plants for the Garden](#).”

[Carol Bornstein](#), now a Central California garden designer, was for years director of horticulture of the [Santa Barbara Botanic Garden](#). The heart-stoppingly beautiful meadow there is her work. In 1976, David Fross co-founded [Native Sons Nursery](#) in the Central Coast city of Arroyo Grande and has since been the Johnny Appleseed of dry gardening. Bart O'Brien, for years director of horticulture at [Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden](#) in Claremont, now its special

projects director, is among the most knowledgeable plantsmen in the country. Once, when interviewing a homeowner by phone, I mentioned that O'Brien was outside, and she screamed, as if he were not one but all four Beatles, straight from Liverpool.

There are as many reasons for this reaction as there are microclimates in California. The most important is that as the need for more durable plants and more sustainable garden practices has steadily increased during the last three decades, these three people have been at every turn with solutions for our state.

Most plants in our nurseries and most garden books in our stores are pitched at nationwide audiences. A book with loving depictions of what is possible on the Maryland shore is as much use to Californians as a camel's hair coat is to a desert tortoise.

By contrast, Bornstein, Fross and O'Brien have kept their focus stubbornly local. They've identified the best plants from our native flora and countries with [similar climates](#). Through their botanic gardens and nursery, they helped to breed these plants into garden cultivars.

This new book, published by Cachuma Press, is a primer on how to use those plants instead of opting for turf.

Like any book on the subject of lawn, "Reimagining" opens by describing the environmental cost of conventional grass landscapes — in grooming lawn, fertilizing it and finally, most disastrous for California, watering it.

Yet rather than say we shouldn't have lawn, the book instead offers more responsible ways to keep it, along with examples of lower-impact green spaces involving sedges or native grasses that they call "greenswards." Also included are models for meadows, succulent gardens, multicolored and textured groundcover treatments called "tapestry gardens," and kitchen gardens. For good measure, they include green roofs.

To put these gardens' efficiency in perspective, the greensward is like a sedan getting more than 35 miles per gallon. Tapestry gardens and meadows are hybrids capable of 50 mpg. The succulent and food gardens are electric cars. The green roof is a unicycle.

The difference between a greensward and a meadow is probably most simply defined by whether one wants to run through it barefoot. For a meadow, you might need hooves. The pages dedicated to meadows have many of the strengths and some of the weaknesses of an earlier book on the subject, ["The American Meadow Garden: Creating a Natural Alternative to the Traditional Lawn"](#) by ornamental grass merchant John Greenlee. Seen in long shots, the loveliest meadows in Greenlee's book look as if they belong to estates, not suburban gardens. However, to its credit, "Reimagining the



California Lawn” is a little more down to earth in depicting what's possible between curb and porch. I just longed for more on one of the trickiest lawn traps of all: the strip between the sidewalk and the street.

The sections on succulent, tapestry and food gardens are all inspiring. I defy anyone with a small, sloped front yard not to find themselves considering our native lilac or dwarf manzanita in lieu of lawn. Those looking to turn to edible gardens as lawn alternatives will also benefit, though they should also investigate Rosalind Creasy’s 2010 book, "[Edible Landscaping](#)." If “Reimagining” turns you onto succulents, then you should probably also check out Debra Lee Baldwin’s "[Designing With Succulents](#)."

“Reimagining the California Lawn” is a long-needed tool to reduce carbon and water footprints while preserving beauty and utility. The book is for Californians by Californians. No other author or imprint can rival Bornstein, Fross and O'Brien's careful selection of species, plant profiles, clear pictures and reliable notes about where each type of plant will thrive and what it will need. Within weeks of buying this book, a motivated beginner could have a plan, a plant list and a set of affordable, achievable goals. The upshot over time would be thousands saved on water, fertilizer and lawn care, and a blooming corridor far superior to grass.

And so, to the three amigos, gracias. Now start thinking about those sidewalk strips.

-- Emily Green



### Lecture schedule

Authors of “Reimagining the California Lawn” — Carol Bornstein, David Fross and Bart O'Brien — will

be lecturing throughout the state in the coming weeks:

**April 2:** [Native Sons Nursery](#), Arroyo Grande

**April 9:** [Bellefontaine Nursery](#), Pasadena

**April 16:** [Assn. of Professional Landscape Designers](#), West Hollywood

**April 16:** [Descanso Gardens](#), La Cañada Flintridge

**April 17:** [Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden](#), Claremont

**April 30:** [Sam and Alfredo Maloof Foundation for Arts and Crafts](#), Alta Loma

**April 30:** [Southern California Spring Garden Show](#), Costa Mesa

**May 12:** [San Diego Botanic Garden](#)

**May 14:** [Tree of Life Nursery](#), San Juan Capistrano

**May 16:** [California Native Plant Society](#), San Diego chapter

**June 9:** [Southern California Horticultural Society](#), Los Angeles

**June 12:** [G2 Gallery](#), Venice

**June 16:** [California Native Plant Society](#), Orange County chapter

*Photo at top of post by John Evarts. Photo of "greensward" with recycled conveyor belt as a path by Saxon Holt. Other photos from Cachuma Press.*



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