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Lush lawns giving way to water-friendly meadows

Native plants can supplant the lush green landscape

By Kathy Kramer, Nora Harlow, and Chris Dundon
Contra Costa Times correspondents

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GREEN, LUSH lawns. They're lovely to look at and provide a fine place for recreation, especially for children. Most of us grew up with lawns, and many of us can't imagine a landscape without them.

But there are good reasons to look for alternatives. About half the water used by most families each year is applied to the landscape, and the bulk of that is poured onto lawns.

Despite this winter's ample rainfall, water is still in short supply. After three years of drought, and with this year's supply still uncertain, many water agencies are rationing water use or asking customers to conserve voluntarily.

Lawns not only guzzle water, they also are the recipients of enormous quantities of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Many of these chemicals have been shown to harm human health. They kill beneficial insects that much wildlife depends on, and they pollute creeks and the Bay.

Add to this the amount of time it takes to mow, weed, and edge a lawn, and you may wonder why you bother. But what could you put in place of the lawn?

Replacing a lawn — or part of it — with California native plants is a beautiful and environmentally friendly solution, as many local gardeners have discovered.

Native plants are adapted to our soils and climate, and most don't even like fertilizer. Many need little or no supplemental water, and some tolerate long periods of drought.

Native plants support a wide variety of wildlife. And their distinctive look and elegant beauty give our gardens a sense of place that is uniquely Californian.

Rick Alatorre of Richmond, owner of Alatorre Garden Design, removed his lawn in increments over a two-year span. In its place, he installed a graceful series of raised beds and paving stone retaining walls.

An intensively planted palette of natives provides a tapestry of color from February through September. Hummingbirds, butterflies, hoverflies, ladybugs, and other wildlife regularly visit the garden.

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The Walnut Creek backyard of Clara Lai and Howard Torf of Walnut Creek is planted to mimic the wildflowers and plants on nearby Mount Diablo. (Kathy Kramer/Brinaina Back the

Now the hedges are history, as is the turf in the back garden. The lawn in front has been reduced. The inspiration for this tranquil garden was nearby Mount Diablo, home to hundreds of species of native plants adapted to high summer heat.

Barbara Leitner of Orinda, a botanist and native plant enthusiast, wanted a garden of plants native to her local watershed. In this attractive, tranquil garden, a sunny meadow is planted with bunchgrasses interspersed with sedges, blue-eyed grass, monkeyflower and a variety of wildflowers.

Soap root, grown from seed, lines the walkway, its delicate, orchidlike evening flower attracting hordes of bumblebees. This garden is also home to garter snakes, salamanders and many birds, including woodpeckers, chickadees, goldfinches, hummingbirds and quail.

While we may miss some aspects of our traditional lawns, the benefits make it well worth the change.

Kathy Kramer is the founder of the Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour; Nora Harlow is with the East Bay Municipal Utility District, and Chris Dundon is with the Contra Costa Water District.

Water Company Help

Both the East Bay Municipal Utility District and the Contra Costa Water District offer rebates to customers who replace lawns with low-water landscapes.

CCWD's Water Efficient Landscape Rebate Program offers residential and nonresidential customers 50 cents per square foot to replace eligible lawn areas with water-efficient landscapes. Residential customers can receive up to \$500 and

Cindy and Rick Simons of Castro Valley wanted to reduce water use, eliminate garden chemicals and provide habitat for wildlife. Now, native bunchgrass "lawns" are the centerpieces of a series of flagstone and decomposed granite paths. Watering has been reduced about 40 percent this year and will be further reduced when the plants are established.

Hummingbirds are now seen in the garden "all the time," the Simonses say, and native bees frequent the many flowering natives.

The garden of Clara Lai and Howard Torf of Walnut Creek was once solid lawn, bordered by view-blocking hedges. Clara and Howard wanted to reduce water use, and Clara, a cut-flower aficionado, wanted color.

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nonresidential customers can receive up to \$5,000. EBMUD's WaterSmart Lawn Conversion program offers residential customers up to \$1,000 for converting qualifying lawn areas to waterwise alternatives.

Both rebate programs are subject to specific requirements and pre-approval, so check with your water company before starting your project.

For information on CCWD's program see www.ccwater.com or call 925-688-8320. For EBMUD's program see www.ebmud.com or call 866-403-2683.

Bringing Back the Natives What: The Sixth annual Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour When: May 2

Where: The free award-winning, self-guided tour includes 50 low- to no-lawn gardens in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The tour showcases pesticide-free gardens that conserve water, provide habitat for wildlife, and contain 50 percent or more native plants. Several of the tour gardens will feature talks by experts on how to remove a lawn and how to design a garden of native plants. Cost: Free, but space is limited and registration is required. You also can sign up as a volunteer. For details, go to www.bringingbackthenatives.net. More: The Native Plant Sale Extravaganza, conducted in conjunction with the tour, takes place May 1-2. For details: www.bringingbackthenatives.net

bye-bye lawn

Lawn removal methods range from slow and free, to faster, costlier and more labor-intensive.

Not yet ready to pull out the whole thing? Try the incremental approach. Consider where your family uses the lawn -- maybe near an entertainment area, or to play ball on in the backyard. Cast a critical eye on other areas, such as the front lawn, the parking strip, or the lawn on one side of the driveway.

Haunt nearby shops and collect cardboard boxes. Remove tape, cut the boxes flat, and lay them over

the lawn with edges overlapping. Request wood chips (delivered free) from many tree services, and place a 6-inch layer over the cardboard. Wait four to six months. Your former lawn will be soft, rich dirt, and you can plant right through the chips.

A faster but more costly approach is to rent a sod cutter. The sod will be reusable, and someone less enlightened than you will want it. Or dig up the lawn with a square-bladed shovel. Try to skim the sod layer off the surface, as opposed to digging straight down.

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Barbara Leitner's garden in Orinda, planted with local natives, is a haven for wildlife; after the lawn was removed quail began nesting in the front garden. (Saxon Holt/Courtesy)



Rick Alatorre's native plant garden brims with color from February through September. (Kathy Kramer?Bringing Back the Natives)



Clara Lai and Howard Torf of Walnut Creek reduced the amount of turf in the front and removed it from the back to create a tranquil garden with hundreds of species of native plants. (Kathy Kramer/Bringing Back the Natives)



Clara Lai and Howard Torf's yard (Kathy Kramer/Bringing Back the Natives)



Cindy and Rick Simons of Castro Valley water- and wildlife-friendly yard uses about 40 percent less water than it did with a full lawn. (Kathy Kramer/Bringing Back the Natives)