

Smart yard

On several fronts, homeowners are being nudged from thirsty lawns to water-conserving landscapes

By Roger M. Showley
STAFF WRITER

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Back in the 1920s, when San Diego boosters campaigned for people to move here, they boasted of our outdoor lifestyle.

“Our people live much out of doors the year-round among their rose gardens and shady lawns,” the San Diego-California Club secretary, Oscar W. Cotton, wrote to prospective immigrants, “motoring, swimming, yachting, playing baseball, tennis and golf, and it seems to make them more joyous than where life is hard.”

Motoring, sports and raising roses are still popular, but “shady lawns” may be fading as a San Diego staple.

Landscape designers and contractors, water agencies and even housing developers are increasingly turning away from thirsty grassy lawns and nudging homeowners to diversify.

Bill Jacoby, a spokesman for the San Diego County Water Authority, said people like him came from the Midwest, via service in the Navy, and were used to having lawns.

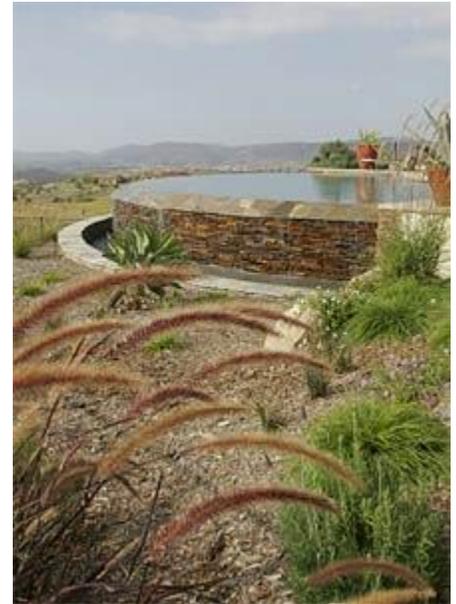
“Over time I've learned that we limit the amount of lawn we have in the yard based on our need,” he said. “Over time people are developing a water conservation ethic in San Diego. We see more and more of that.”

Vonn Marie May, a landscape historian, said a green lawn has been a common sight at model home projects, even during droughts.

“Lawns sell houses and there's some kind of little trigger when people see that,” May said.

Ted Steinberg, author of “American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn,” said the belief in a “perfect lawn” retains its hold on much of America.

“I think, though, that there are some signs, in my opinion, of change here. Certainly, the turf industry is worried,” he said, citing actions in Canada to restrict the use of pesticides and fertilizers to reduce pollution. “They're worried enough that they're now engaged in a PR campaign to continue to work Americans over and



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

Carin and Bob Pollack traded a lawn in Minnesota for a low-maintenance yard in Santaluz filled with aloes, yuccas, fountain grass, wisteria, fig and citrus trees and California native plants.

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- [When grass doesn't make the cut ...](#)

convince them that green is good and that more green is better.”

Landscaping guidelines in master-planned communities often lead to widespread planting of lawns, he said, even if the geography and climatic conditions don't warrant them.

“The idea that we need grass from sea to shining sea is basically silly and makes no sense at all,” Steinberg said.

Carin and Bob Pollack have lived the lawn life; two-thirds of their former 3-acre homestead in Minnesota was grass that Bob happily mowed while aboard his John Deere tractor-mower.

Now, the couple, both native Californians, and their two teenage children live in Santaluz, a 900-home, 3,900-acre community north of state Route 56. Instead of rolling carpets of Kentucky bluegrass, front yards and common-area open space are filled with California native plants and other trees and shrubs that thrive in our Mediterranean-style climate of dry summers and warm, wet winters.

“In Minnesota you don't water the lawn. God does that,” Carin said. “It makes us sick to drive through (San Diego) neighborhoods and see gutters with moss in them because people's sprinklers are on and the water is flowing down the street.”

The Pollacks' property does include a bit of lawn near the front and back doors, but the rest of the landscaping is by and large drought-tolerant: California pepper trees, African sumacs and pineapple guavas; aloes, yuccas and other succulents; fountain grass; wisteria, lavender and salvia; shrub-type roses; and, for fruit trees, fig and citrus that need little water once they are established.

As the sun sets, the family often gravitates to what their landscape architect called the “viewing deck,” oriented to the northwest over the water-wise plantings in Santaluz's open space.

And does Bob Pollack pine for another ride on his tractor mower?

Said his wife, “Not one bit.”

Santaluz's Scottsdale, Ariz.-based developers saw San Diego's climate as an asset to be marketed, not a liability to be covered over with verdant lawns.

“We wanted to make Santaluz what it looked like 100 years ago, so we came up with this idea of native-type species,” said Terry Randall, senior vice president of DMB Associates. “The grasses we planted aren't native, but they look like old native grasses and we accented them with trees. We just love the feel and think it turned out beautifully.”



MARY JANE OLENSKI

Mary Jane Olenski relandscaped her front yard after removing the lawn installed by the developer.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

In Santaluz, developer landscape regulations forbid the widespread use of lawn.

From grass to gazebo

Elsewhere, individual homeowners need courage, knowledge and dough if they intend to chuck their edgers and mowers, fertilizers and crab grass killers.

Do you dare vary your landscape from that of your neighbors? How do you know where to begin? And how much will it cost?

For Therese and Serge DaSilva in Scripps Ranch, their outdoor makeover began with a garage door that wouldn't open due to a warped driveway. Their backyard fence was collapsing and the outdoor arrangement of shrubs and grass no longer suited their empty-nester lifestyle

Serge, a retired fishing boat captain, said he didn't mind mowing the grass, "But after so many years, it was a chore."

They brought in landscape designer Pamela Homfelt of pH Exterior Design to rethink the property just south of Lake Miramar. Now, a year and more than \$100,000 later (most of it spent on a new driveway and wall), the DaSilvas' home has a new look.

A new courtyard leads to the front door, a gazebo on a raised platform and barbecue dominate the backyard and a wealth of new plantings populate the entire property. The garage door didn't need replacing but nearly everything else outside did.

Unlike most of the neighbors' landscapes, grass is largely absent from Homfelt's plan.

"It's pretty hard to talk people out of grass," she said.

But during construction, the DaSilvas said, many neighbors came to peek over the new backyard wall and to take notes on what plants were going in. Some called Homfelt about having her do the same thing for them.

For Homfelt, eliminating grass isn't where she begins an assignment, but it's often where owners begin talking to her after years of frustration.

"They're just sick of the constant maintenance of a lawn and the fact that they don't use it," she said. "Our space is precious here in California, so to have something taking up weekly maintenance, every-other-day watering and a lot of fertilizer and to serve no purpose, eventually you get to the point where you think, 'I could be having parties out there. I could be sitting in a shaded garden. I could have a rose garden.'"

The decision to uproot the lawn often comes with the realization that homeowners spend a lot of time and money on their lawns when they could use the space for better things and save time and money in the long run. But Homfelt said launching into a massive redo should be done carefully. "There's a reason for everything. It takes some thought and planning."

Another Homfelt client, Norma and Richard Ferrara in Bankers Hill, ripped out most of the front and side yards around their 1930s home, including the lawn, but left in place a mature olive tree, pittosporum and two desert ironwood trees. Then they installed a drought-tolerant palette of rosemary, lavatera, low-growing juniper, cactus and succulents, and triangle palm trees. Flagstones separated by small pebbles form the walkways.

"I had the sense that nothing worked anymore," Norma said. "Gardens change over time and certain plants get

big and the ones on the other side die. The symmetry there initially is gone.”

The Ferraras spent about \$20,000 on their redo and, as a dividend, pay 25 percent less in their water bill.

No-lawn incentive

That sort of testimonial cheers the folks at the San Diego County Water Authority and other water agencies, who have set a goal of saving 100,000 acre-feet of water – enough for 200,000 homes – over the next 20 years.

So far, switching to low-water use devices and appliances, such as low-flow toilets and shower heads, has saved 45,000 acre-feet.

Much of the remaining 55,000-acre-foot reduction will have to come from residential landscaping. A typical household devotes up to 70 percent of its 350 gallons per day of water use for outdoor landscaping. The high percentage is partly due to the fact that lawns generally use four times more water than water-wise plantings.

“We want people to reduce the amount of unnecessary landscape watering, whether it's turf or high-water-use plants,” said Jacoby, the water authority spokesman.

In the Otay Water District, officials are conducting a pilot cash-for-grass program to see if customers will respond to a financial incentive to reduce or eliminate their lawns. In the initial test, three homeowners and three homeowner associations participated in replacing 24,000 square feet of lawn.

Project manager William Granger said participants receive \$1 per square foot of grass removed up to a maximum of \$2,200 for a single-family home. (There's a similar program available to homeowner associations.) The next two years are being funded by a \$108,000 grant from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. That will be enough to replace 48,000 square feet of lawn.

“We're trying to demonstrate that it's wise” to rethink lawn use, Granger said.

Mary Jane Olenski, a homeowner in Sunbow in Chula Vista who was one of the initial participants in the program, said she spent about \$7,200 to remove the developer-installed front lawn and install a California native-themed landscape. The water district covered \$1,478 of her costs.

“It smells wonderful and looks pretty,” she said of the new plantings – manzanitas, Toyon, coffee berry, ceanothus and, in an courtyard entry way, cactus and succulents.

Olenski, a master gardener, said she would have eventually replaced the lawn, but the water district's program spurred her to early action. So far, none of her neighbors has followed suit.

The move away from water-hogging lawns is getting support from the state Legislature, which passed the California Water Conservation in Landscaping Act in August. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed it into law late last month.

It requires the Department of Water Resources to update its model landscape water-conservation ordinance and local agencies to follow suit; the California Energy Commission to adopt performance standards for irrigation equipment; and homeowner associations to allow residents to install low-water-using plants.

“Water conservation is the one approach to addressing water supply that works in every area of California,” said the bill's author, Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz. “Because the pumping, movement and storage of water is energy-intensive, this bill should also be considered part of California's unfolding strategy to combat climate change.”

Richard Monson, president of the California Association of Homeowner Associations, said many of his members already recognize the downside of lawns as a common-area landscaping type.

“They are very, very concerned about that because the cost of water is also reflected in the sewer (bill),” Monson said. “So conservation is very, very important and has become a very important part of financial planning simply because of the costs.”

For further information:

- Pamela Homfelt, pH Exterior Design: (619) 741-1090 or phdesign@cox.net.
 - San Diego County Water Authority, conservation tips: www.sdcwa.org/manage/conservation.phtml.
 - Metropolitan Water District of Southern California: www.bewaterwise.com.
 - Otay Water District cash-for-plants program: William Granger, water conservation manager, (619) 670-2290 or wgranger@otaywater.gov.
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- Roger M. Showley: (619) 293-1286; roger.showley@uniontrib.com
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MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE MAKES WATER-WISE SENSE

When Pamela Homfelt of pH Exterior Design in La Mesa arrived at Serge and Therese DaSilva's home in Scripps Ranch in mid-2005, she found a 20-year-old, two-story house surrounded by a lawn and junipers and a variety of trees in the front, grass and melaleucas in the back.

After several meetings with the couple, she devised a plan that featured drought-tolerant, Mediterranean-climate plantings in the front, a tropical, entertainment-oriented layout in the backyard and a new entry courtyard, also in a tropical theme.

The DaSilvas spent about \$70,000 of their \$100,000-plus budget on hardscape – a new driveway, gazebo, barbecue patio and rear and side masonry wall. The rest went into unusual and exotic plants, irrigation, lighting and planning.

Some plants remained undisturbed – in the front, a Washington palm, and in the back, a 10-foot-tall schefflera. Everything else was ripped out and replaced with a variety of specimens.

To draw attention to the somewhat hidden front door, Homfelt designed an entry courtyard, accessed via an added walkway from the street through a pair of mahogany gates and enclosed behind a newly installed low wall. Plantings include a Travelers palm and ground cover that preview the tropical look in back.

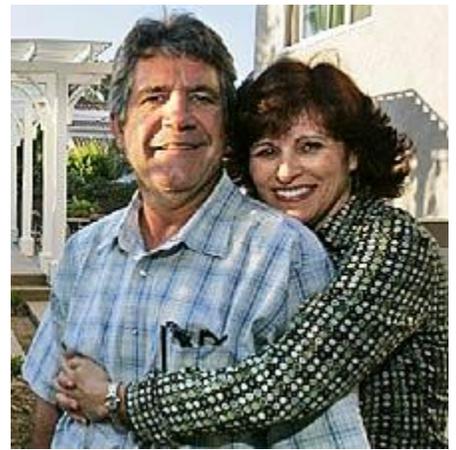
The side yard facing the street of the corner lot includes dwarf Meyer lemon, navel orange and honey tangerine trees, plus a hybrid 'Tiny Tower' Italian cypress and silvery coast rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*), to acknowledge the family's Mediterranean-Portuguese heritage.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Drought-tolerant landscaping can be dramatic.

The frontyard lost all but a spot of grass (used to link the side street to the new front walkway) and gained a long list of water-wise plants: a bottle tree (*Brachychiton acerifolius*) and dwarf coral tree (*Erythrina christagalli*); upright 'Torch Glow' bougainvillea; "Pink Splendor" mirror plant (*Coprosma repens* 'Pink Splendor'), purple fountain grass and hybrid flax. The DaSilvas added a custom-made mailbox for themselves and their neighbors.

The backyard underwent equally dramatic changes. The tropical palette includes several palm varieties, a small shrubby *Ficus parcellii*, bromeliads, cycads, a scarlet trumpet vine for the gazebo and a *Gelsemium sempervirens* (Carolina jessamine) fragrant vine along the wall. Mixed herbs, such as basil, cilantro and parsley, were used to skirt other plants.



Serge and Therese DaSilva

Tropical Porphyry, a stone that sometimes includes fossil imprints in the surface, is used as steppingstones, the barbecue countertop and veneer for the frontyard pilasters. Mulch and Jewel Mint or Corsican mint (*Mentha requienii*) separate the steppingstones.

To top off the backyard, Homfelt installed a free-standing fountain into the stucco masonry wall to appear as if it were built into the wall. As an accent, there's also a Travelers tree (*Ravenala madagascariensis*) with its fan of bananalike leaves atop a single trunk.

Light fixtures from Vista Lighting Co. and standard irrigation sprayheads, not drip irrigation, were used throughout and grouped into zones on the automatic sprinkler system to control the time and quantity of water suitable for each plant type.

Homfelt said it took more than a year to complete the DaSilva job, longer than the usual eight to nine months, because the family allowed the contractors, Azar Builders Inc. and Green Gardens Landscape, to work on other projects as necessary.

Those planning a new landscape should count on four or five meetings over a two-month span to perfect the plan, she said, and another two months to select the contractors and ongoing meetings with consultants and contractors.

– *ROGER M. SHOWLEY*

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