

LAWN ALTERNATIVES — by Agi Kehoe

More and more Californians are becoming interested in replacing their high maintenance, high water- and fertilizer-using lawns with wiser, native alternatives ranging from ground covers to meadows. Our native grasses have many advantages over conventional lawns: their root systems improve the soil; they are much more drought-tolerant; they provide forage and cover for wildlife and habitat for beneficial insects; and they have an important ornamental value in our gardens. Here are some tips for replacing your existing lawn.

If your lawn has no invasive species such as Bermuda or Kikuyu grass, then you can remove it with a sod cutter, turn it root-side up, and cover it with top soil and compost. The area is then ready for planting. If more time is available, the existing lawn can be smothered with cardboard and a thick layer of mulch for a few months, which allows the old grass to decompose. If the lawn is full of weeds and invasive grasses, hand removal may be the best solution. After removal, an application of organic compost on top of the existing soil will help the new plants get a good start. This is especially useful for clay soils. Tilling is not necessary or advisable, as it brings up more weed seeds.

What can one plant in lieu of a lawn? For coastal areas try native ground covers such as beach strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*), sea thrift (*Armeria maritima*), or yerba buena (*Satureja douglasii*). Other alternatives to turf grass are creeping red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) or Pacific dune sedge (*Carex pansa*). These can be mowed with a push mower, set at the highest setting, or allowed to grow to form a natural, lumpy carpet. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) can be established from seed in one season; it tolerates some foot traffic and it doesn't mind the mower, either.

If the aim is to create curb appeal in an area that will not have regular foot traffic, a wildflower and bunch grass meadow can be very satisfying. Bunch-forming grasses are best for this purpose because they don't out-compete the wildflowers. These include purple needlegrass (*Nassella pulchra*), nodding needlegrass (*Nassella cernua*), Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*), tufted hairgrass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), foothill sedge (*Carex tumulicola*), California fescue (*Festuca californica*), and deergrass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*). The meadow can be planted on a mound and dressed with rocks to make it more natural in appearance. Suitable perennial wildflowers for a meadow include checkerbloom (*Sidalcea malviflora*), blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*), California buttercup (*Ranunculus californicus*), Douglas iris (*Iris douglasiana*), meadow onion (*Allium unifolium*), yarrow, blue flax (*Linum lewisii*), California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), seaside daisy (*Erigeron glaucus*), and the smaller buckwheats (*Eriogonum ssp.*).

To learn more, see the article "Creating a Native California Meadow" by David Amme in **Grasslands**, Vol XIII, No. 3, Summer 2003 (available from the California Native Grasslands Association). Other helpful reading: **Wild Lilies, Irises, and Grasses: Gardening with California Monocots** by Nora Harlow and Kristin Jakob, editors (University of California Press).

[Note: Plant California natives wisely. Protect rare and endangered species and prevent gene pool contamination by using locally grown species in the landscape. Avoid using invasive plants, whether native or introduced. <http://www.cnps.org/archives/landscaping.htm>.]

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