

# Experts offer alternatives to letting your lawn die during drought (video)

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By BoNhia Lee

Property owners across the central San Joaquin Valley are facing a tough question this summer — keep their grass a vibrant green or let it turn crispy brown during one of the worst droughts to hit California in years?

The city of Fresno might have made the decision easy for some when it announced last week that people can only water their yards two days a week instead of the current three starting Aug. 1. No watering at all this winter.

For those who can't let go of their lawn, there are water-saving solutions and alternatives to grass that can save some green space or keep yards presentable, lawn experts say.

"Nobody wants to see a lawn go brown," said Micheal Schutz, manager of Pro Turf, a Sanger lawn fertilization and weed control company. "It looks bad."

Pro Turf helps commercial and residential property owners maintain their yards. That means getting rid of pesky clovers and adjusting sprinklers for a thriving lawn. But to save water this summer, the company is painting grass.

Don't think of it as painting a wall, but spraying an odorless and biodegradable color, known as Turf Medix, onto brown grass to make it green.

It's an organic coating that has nutrients, holds moisture and slows down grass growth, Schutz said. That means watering is reduced by 30% to 50%. The color dries in about 10 minutes and lasts three to five months, he said.

The solution can be used in the summer or in the winter instead of seeding your lawn, especially now that watering is not allowed, company owner Derik Jakusz said.

Takao Nursery, west of Highway 99, is one of two California growers licensed to grow and sell UC Verde Buffalograss, a fine-textured grass bred for the hot, dry climate in California and Arizona.

The grass was created by researchers at the University of California at Davis and Riverside in 2003. It uses 50% to 75% less water than a traditional fescue lawn in Fresno, said nursery owner Danny Takao, who sells mostly to homeowners and business owners in Southern California, where water rates are high.

But the grower is pushing for more people to use the grass in the Valley as water restrictions get tighter and droughts become more commonplace.

"The people in the Valley for some reason have been slow to conserve water," Takao said. "It's been so cheap for so long that they just let it go into the gutter."

The buffalograss takes regular watering to get established at first. A property owner buys the plugs and plants them in staggered rows almost like shrubs. The plugs send out runners to spread and in three to four months it will start to look like grass.

It can be mowed for a manicured look or left to grow, up to six inches max, for a meadow look. Once established, the grass only needs to be watered twice a week or less in dire water situations, Takao said.

The grass goes dormant over the winter, but does so later in the season, around November, and emerges sooner in the spring.

The nursery, which specializes in perennials, started growing the grass more than five years ago in response to increasing water concerns, Takao said.

"We're going to have to start conserving what we have and it's just common sense," Takao said. "We're frugal when we're in a drought and when it rains we're careless and use a lot of water. I think we have to be careful with how we live in California."

Other landscaping options include xeriscaping or using drought-tolerant plants in front lawns instead of grass.

Some Valley builders already are going that route, including Granville Homes, which offers buyers in some neighborhoods the option to have a yard without grass.

Then there is synthetic grass for people who still want the green look but not the maintenance.

Synthetic Grass Solutions has seen a spike in inquiries and jobs this summer. There is almost a four-month wait for installation, co-owner Kyle Hunt said. Last year, the wait was only about two months.

Hunt describes synthetic grass as an outdoor carpet for your home. Synthetic grass can come in hundreds of colors and lengths, but the company specializes in a grass that Hunt designed made of recycled rubber.

The recycled rubber is about 20% cooler than nylon grass, which radiates heat, Hunt said. He admits that synthetic grass does get warm, but a little bit of water cools it off for a couple of hours, he said.

That's the only water you need to maintain the grass. During installation, the company caps off sprinklers, removes two inches of grass and replaces it with decomposed granite and the synthetic grass.

When Hunt and his partner, Kyle Zimmerman, started the company five years ago, most of the clients were people who didn't want to spend a lot of time maintaining their yards, Hunt said. "Now it's because of the drought."

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