

## Sod companies turn to tech, hardy grasses as industry takes a hit from drought

By Eric Kurhi

[ekurhi@mercurynews.com](mailto:ekurhi@mercurynews.com)

Posted: 04/24/2015 03:57:47 PM PDT | [Comment](#) | Updated: 4 days ago



Lucio Cruz checks the operation of a newly installed low-flow watering system in the front yard of a home in Willow Glen in San Jose on April, 16, 2015. (Gary Reyes/Bay Area News Group)

GILROY -- Motorists snaking through the steadily drying scenery along Highway 101 might notice a break in the beige just as they enter this town: a lush green oasis proudly on display, emerald blades of grass defying the drought's decree to wither and die.

It's the sample lawn of the Grass Farm's Garden Accents center, and owner Erin Gil said it goes to show that despite calls for 25 percent water cuts and limits on landscape watering to a semiweekly affair, homeowners can keep their turf good and green even in dry times.

Erin Gil, center, gives a demonstration of cutting edge watering technology EZ-FLO drip irrigation system to Phill Laursen, from left, David York, Benito Arellano and Primitivo Cruz at Grass Farm Nursery in Gilroy on March 26, 2015. (Josie Lepe/Bay Area News Group)

He's up against both popular opinion and some official decrees -- "Brown is the new green," said the Santa Clara Valley Water District, which is offering \$2 a square foot for homeowners to scalp their lawns and replace them with something more drought tolerant. Other Bay Area water agencies have similar programs -- it's a significant source of water savings, as outdoor irrigation makes up for half of all water usage in residential areas.

But with ingenuity, some imported technology and botanical wrangling to rustle up the most tenacious grass varieties, the sod industry is trying to stay rooted through tumultuous times.

#### Advertisement

Industry officials had no figures for losses caused by the drought but acknowledged sales have sagged. Gil said his business was down 30 percent last year and "maybe more this year," and has started using some of his land to grow bell peppers to help stay afloat.

"It's a very, very unfortunate situation," said Jim Novak, spokesman for the Chicago-based Turfgrass Producers International. "Obviously the drought is impacting turf producers and landscapers. The concern we have is seeing some of these water districts taking severe steps."

Santa Clara water district spokesperson Colleen Valles said the cash-for-grass program has grown like a weed since 2013, when 160,000 square feet were converted. Last year it was 1.1 million square feet and already in the first three months of 2015 they're at over a million.

"People are really taking us up on it," Valles said. "The drought is really hitting home and calls for increased conservation have been resonating."

Novak said hold on: "The benefits of turf are really quite substantial, and there's a consequence to overreacting."

Those benefits, according to industry experts and academic studies, include reducing ambient temperatures, preventing soil erosion, filtering contaminants and adding to a more soothing, healthy environment.

Lucio Cruz holds a handful of damp soil that was watered by a low-flow watering system in the front yard of a home in Willow Glen in San Jose on April, 16, 2015. (Gary Reyes/Bay Area News Group)

"It helps with anxiety and depression, and it's good for communities, especially with lower socioeconomic status," said Jack Karlin of the Turfgrass Water Conservation Alliance, which strives to promote the most hardy, drought-resistant fescues and bluegrasses possible. "It's cheap health insurance."

Novak said that they're "not taking the situation in California lightly," and that while they understand why the governor is mandating conservation, they fear long-term adverse effects from hasty reactions.

"If circumstances change," Novak said, "and in three or four years the weather gets back to normal, the consequences of ripping out lawn will remain."



The drought has seen the state's sod sellers get creative. At Gil's 45-year-old, family-owned Grass Farm, he's promoting a subterranean drip-irrigation system for lawns, borne from the Millennium drought that ravaged Australia for 15 years. He said it used up to 70 percent less water than traditional surface sprinklers. It has fabric-wicked piping that runs 9 inches deep in a serpentine pattern, putting water directly to the roots of the grass. The downside: It's expensive, costing about twice as much to install as traditional sprinklers.

But for those who want a guilt-free lawn, it's an option.

Erin Gil, proprietor, gives a demonstration of cutting edge watering technology EZ-FLO drip irrigation system for contractors at Grass Farm Nursery in Gilroy on March 26, 2015. (Josie Lepe/Bay Area News Group)



"I always wanted a lawn, but what kind of idiot plants grass in a drought?" said Phill Laursen, a retired teacher who hopes to have a 30-by-50-foot lawn in place for his daughter's summertime wedding, at a recent Grass Farm demonstration. "I was really worried about putting in sod. But then I saw this."

Grass experts around the country have said that despite turf turning from fond friend to public enemy with the state in a fourth year of drought, it's not the grass to blame, but wasteful watering practices, for what's been thought of as carefree ground cover for generations.

At the Delta Bluegrass Co. in Stockton, the sod and seed operation saw the light nearly a decade ago and started selling native "no mow" grasses that not only take less water, but grow to a natural length that's rougher than a golf putting green but far from a weed patch.

But while they're seeing interest pique during the drought, it's still far from a top seller: Out of more than 1,200 acres of sod being grown, only 50 to 75 acres are of the no-mow variety, said seed specialist Jodie Sheffield.

"It does cost more to produce and there's less yield, and a lot of people are not ready for that kind of meadow look," she said.

Grass pros argue that with a contemporary grass variant coupled with a dialed-in irrigation system and a lawn owner with a mind for water management, beige doesn't have to be the de rigueur rage.

But lawn owners often don't have an ideal grass variant, and if they do they don't know how to properly care for it. While everyone doesn't necessarily need to install a state-of-the-art subterranean drip system, often what homeowners have is archaic, primitive and, by nature, wasteful.

"If you did it right, you'd be fine," said Dave Fujino, director of the California Center for Urban Horticulture at UC Davis.

But Fujino said that's rarely the case.

And what about a computerized "smart" system that downloads data from the state's weather monitors, uses moisture-sensing ground probes, and cycles through zones to prevent runoff?

Fujino said to save your money -- a proper system and set up would easily range between \$1,000 and \$2,000 -- unless you know what you are doing or are willing to pay someone who does.

"The system is only as smart as the person who programs it," he said, "and irrigation is a lot more complicated than people think."

Contact Eric Kurhi at 408-920-5852. Follow him at [Twitter.com/erickurhi](https://twitter.com/erickurhi).

---

---

From around the web Selected for you by a Sponsor

[Recommended by](#)

More from the web

You Might Also Like

[Recommended by](#)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- [Article commenting rules of the road](#)
-