

# Fresno's lawn care services fight not to dry up with the drought

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Lawns across Fresno are drying up with the drought as homeowners choose not to water them, and lawn care businesses may be going dry with them. Yet there may be life in both.

Some homeowners think they should just let a lawn go brown and wait for the future to water. But rather than go dormant, the lawn may die completely. And it costs a lot of money to bring a lawn back once it's dead, said Jim Olson, general manager of Weed Man Lawn Care.

If you drive around Fresno, the number of brown lawns is incredible.

Paul Dorris, owner of Dorris Lawn Care

"Letting your lawn go...that is one solution, but it's not the best solution," he said.

Lawns are not just home decoration but serve vital functions, keeping a city cooler than it would be if it was all pavement, and acting as a natural water filter, he said.

"Turn off water to our lawns...we're dirtying up the air and dirtying up the environment too," he said.

Olson says Weed Man in southeast Fresno can help with a customer's water efficiency, whether it's by retrofitting fitting sprinklers or simply advising how to water more smartly, such as by breaking up 30 minutes spent watering a lawn into three 10-minute increments watering sections to prevent runoff.

"If you want to keep your lawn, we can tell you how to do that and how to still keep it green and help it survive," he said.

While Weed Man is trying to keep lawns natural, at the beginning of the year it started offering the alternative of artificial turf, for which there has been greater demand, Olson said.

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Paul Dorris, owner of Dorris Lawn Care

These are the three areas that Weed Man focuses on, Olson said — irrigation, lawn care and artificial turf. While lawn care business has declined, as Olson said is to be expected with customers fretting about keeping their lawn, both artificial turf and irrigation have seen growth.

Weed Man isn't the only business to have both growth and decline. Dorris Lawn Care has seen in recent months an increase of calls to adjust and repair sprinklers and set up drip irrigation for better water use, but business has also been lost from fewer homeowners interested in watering their lawns, said owner Paul Dorris.

"If you drive around Fresno, the number of brown lawns is incredible," he said.

Most of his business comes from large houses in north Fresno and Clovis — he said he has only three or four customers south of Shaw Avenue.

Dorris said he downsized the business not by laying off employees, but by cutting back work hours and reducing employees to part-timers. He also acknowledged the growing popularity of artificial turf.

“Still, people like real lawns, so those of us who do the maintenance will stay in business that way,” he said.

But maintenance isn't necessarily the only aspect of lawn care, nor is fake grass the only alternative; businesses focusing on other less-traditional methods of lawn care are also on the rise. Two local lawn-painting services, Mirage Lawn Painting and Ultimate Property Concept, both started in May to paint drying brown lawns green.

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Jim Olson, general manager of Weed Man Lawn Care

Joshua Cox, owner of Mirage Lawn Painting, said his business isn't necessarily a rival to traditional lawn care, but a supplement. Clients who take him on often have a traditional lawn care service already taking care of their lawn and are just trying to make it look greener, he said.

“So they kind of go hand-in-hand,” he said. “I don't think it hurts or helps them.”

Kimberly Morton, vice president of Ultimate Property Concept, disagrees. She said that the lawn-painting business is cutting into more traditional lawn care businesses.

Morton feels bad about it, but customers do what they have to do in a drought, she said. And lawn-painting is the easy option, requiring less maintenance than watering while not as excessive as ripping out a lawn, she said.

People are unsure of what they're going to do.

Derik Jakusz, owner of Pro Turf

Lawn painting has caught on with a more traditional lawn care business. Pro Turf, which has been open for about seven years, added lawn painting to its line of services last year, said owner Derik Jakusz.

A company with a lawn painting product asked if Pro Turf wanted to use it. Instead Pro Turf bought out the company and started selling the product directly and offering lawn painting as a service, he said.

While lawn painting has added to the business, other parts have taken a hit, such as lawn fertilization. That's a pity, Jakusz said, as the business has reformulated its fertilizer for stronger lawns, using potash to help with the roots.

Pro Turf also has ways for customers to conserve water in their gardening, aerating the soil with holes for better water penetration/runoff prevention and offering products that help soil retain more water.

Two employees recently quit, a manager and a spray technician, leaving Pro Turf with three full-time employees and one part-timer, he said. The business has lost some customers permanently to artificial turf and has others waiting on lawn maintenance until summer is over, he said.

“People are unsure of what they're going to do,” he said, noting that some are just letting their lawns die.

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Jim Olson, general manager of Weed Man Lawn Care

Team Green Lawn Fertilization and Weed Control in east-central Fresno have also seen a decrease in business within the past two years when requests from new customers started declining, said owner John Mansfield. In the last year he has lost regulars who changed their landscaping to be more drought-tolerant or replaced grass with synthetic turf, while others are turning down his services until fall.

Mansfield said he diversified the business to adapt, adding pest control to his fertilization and weed removal business. A lot of customers call him to take care of their lawns and their pests, he said.

He offers products that allow the soil to better retain water like Pro Turf does, and gives customers tips on how to water more efficiently and avoid runoff. He also advises customers to change their lawns to have more native grasses that need less water, although Team Green will not replace grasses, and those interested in native grasses have to find another business that will.

It may be education and not maintenance that is the most important part of lawn care, or so Olson said. Weed Man is trying to educate customers on the importance of keeping lawns alive by consulting with them and correcting any misinformation.

“The goal is to try to help people keep their lawns alive until things do turn around,” Olson said. “Because they probably will.”

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