

Getting the Most out of your Lawn while Conserving Water.

We have a fascination with green grass. The major advantages of a lawn is that it supplies a comfortable and inviting surface for barefoot play and lounging on warm days, it reduces glare near hardscapes and it cools the air around it. A lawn also adds distinctive color, texture, and function to a landscape. On the other hand, formally maintained, highly manicured areas of turf are the most water – and maintenance – demanding elements of any landscape.

There is no reason why a lawn should cover every square foot of property. The average lawn uses **three to four times** as much water as other areas of the landscape. This is because a great deal of water is lost in turf areas due to evaporation from the grassy surface, or due to being inefficiently watered. In addition, the prevailing species of grasses used in lawns here in the Northwest require a large amount of water to stay dependably green most of the year, or have been installed on lousy soil typically right after building is complete which can affect its water requirements.

Think of your lawn as an attractive, living outdoor carpet for areas of heavy use, so it becomes a choice of function instead of the major component of your garden's design. A lawn doesn't have to be big to look good or be useful.

There are a number of things you can do to make your lawn more efficient:

First consider alternative grass species. The most important characteristics of a lawn are grass color, texture, blade thickness, sod-forming capabilities, and water requirements. For a water-saving lawn, narrow your choices by selecting a more drought resistant species whose water requirements come close to being met by the amount of rainfall you get.

Second learn to water your lawn more efficiently. Generally, 1 inch of water per week is plenty to keep a lawn healthy, unless temperatures exceed 85 degrees, then 1 ½ inches of water is needed per week. Misaligned or broken spray heads and runoff are some of the biggest causes of water waste.

Third, look at reducing the area of lawn in your landscape by considering other plant materials such as groundcovers, perennials, shrubs, or hard surfaces.

Fourth, evaluate your lawns needs. 1) Place the lawn where it will be the most useful. 2) Edge the lawn's perimeter so that it is easy to mow. 3) Avoid planting trees or shrubs inside turf area. 4) Keep the turf physical layout in easy to irrigate shapes (circles or rounded edges). 5) Don't put grass on steep slopes, not only is it hard to irrigate efficiently but it is even harder to mow. 6) Consider placing thirsty plants near turf so they can get more water.

Here are a few examples of what to look for. Where foot traffic is heavy in place of lawn you might consider a path of stone, brick, wood, mulch, or some other nonliving material. Narrow strips such as those commonly found along sidewalks and driveways are difficult to mow or water efficiently. A rule of thumb is that any area less than 16 feet wide is inefficient for lawn. Plant such areas with water-wise, lower maintenance plants.

Overly shady or fiercely hot and dry spots are also prime candidates for lawn alternatives more suited to such conditions. Convert these problem areas to attractive plantings of tough groundcovers, shrubs, perennials or any combination of these.