

*For Eye on the Environment 6-14-15*

## **Grass Replacement is Divine for Suburban Lawns**

By David Goldstein, Ventura County Public Works Agency

Last week, Camarillo City councilwoman Charlotte Craven proudly showed me her lush green backyard lawn. Why would an advocate of water conservation be pleased to display a landscape some regard as a symbol of profligate suburban water use? Because her lawn uses no water. It is synthetic turf.

Her artificial lawn complements several varieties of drought tolerant plants she planted during our previous major drought, in the early 1990s. In her front yard, her giant cacti complement a New Mexico mission bell, projecting a water wise southwest image.

With a landscape like that, she was justified to poke fun at the concept of the suburban lawn by forwarding a humorous email about a conversation God would likely have with Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals and nature. In this email, Saint Francis gives God an update regarding American gardening practices.

God asks, "What happened to the dandelions, violets, and thistle I started eons ago? I had a perfect, no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honeybees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colors by now. But all I see are these green rectangles."

To which Saint Francis replies, "It's the tribes that settled there, Lord. The Suburbanites. They started calling your flowers weeds and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass."

When Saint Francis informs the Lord that the suburbanites fertilize grass to make it grow then cut it as often as twice a week, God asks if the suburbanites are baling it and selling it as a valuable crop. Then Saint Francis gives God the disappointing news, "Actually, they put it in bags and pay to throw it away."

Hoping to find a larger dialogue or a play from which this was derived, I searched the internet for its source. I found it attributed to both a lawn care company and a newspaper columnist. The web site of a non-profit environmental organization includes it with the statement "author unknown." Most interesting was the response I read from the webmaster of one web site posting it who claimed "God himself sent it to me."

Whether you seek to avoid divine chastisement or simply want to avoid the waste of our typical suburban gardening follies, there are many attractive alternatives to lawns. Most options not only conserve water, but also cut use of pesticides and fertilizers and prevent the smog created by lawn mowers. Some alternatives, such as artificial turf, can even include recycled content. However, a barrier to any of these alternatives is the difficulty and expense of removing grass.

One source of help is the Master Gardener Help Line, which is available Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1 PM to 4 PM, at 645-1455. You can also e-mail them at [mgventura@ucdavis.edu](mailto:mgventura@ucdavis.edu)

According to a flier produced by the California Native Plant Society, the main methods used for removing sod are sheet mulching, solarization, physical removal, kick sod cutting, motorized sod cutting, and rototilling. Their web site, at [http://www.cnps.org/cnps/grownative/lawn/#find\\_a\\_pro](http://www.cnps.org/cnps/grownative/lawn/#find_a_pro) , lists the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

My parents recently paid a landscaper to remove their lawn and had a problem with nutgrass continuing to come up through their weed barrier. The landscaper returned three times to apply an herbicide they would have preferred not to use, but this is not really a downside to turf removal. Their gardener would likely have used similar herbicide to control nutgrass infiltration of their landscape even they had left in their lawn.

Incentives available from public agencies and water distributors generally do not cover the full cost of replacing lawns, so consider saving money by removing your old grass yourself. Keep your eye on both the environment and on your wallet by reading the details of subsidy arrangements in your area, because some deals for subsidies require documentation of a healthy green lawn being removed before you can qualify for funds to help you install a drought tolerant substitute. Also, contact your Community Development/Planning Department to see if a local ordinance requires city approval before work begins. In Camarillo, for example, a landscaping ordinance requires approval for replacement of front yard landscaping, but the restriction does not apply to back yards.

*On the net:*

<http://ucanr.edu/sites/vcmg/>

<http://saveourwater.com>

[http://www.ventura.org/rma/build\\_safe/pdf/graywater-workshop.pdf](http://www.ventura.org/rma/build_safe/pdf/graywater-workshop.pdf)

<http://ucanr.edu/sites/vcmg/?calitem=268513&q=57310>