

*For Eye on the Environment 7/19/15*

## **Get Off The Grass! Groundcover Greener Than Paint**

By David Goldstein, Ventura County Public Works Agency

Over the past month, my two columns about lawns have drawn interesting responses. In addition to debating the aesthetic merits and environmental purity of synthetic turf, some have questioned the viability of grasscycling (leaving cut grass on the lawn as a means to save water and reduce waste) as a solution in various circumstances.

Recently, I received a helpful series of emails from one reader who explained how an alternative solution worked for her. Yvonne DiFrancesco, of Moorpark, described herself as a “tree hugger” who searched for a way to avoid watering without resorting to artificial turf or drought tolerant landscape (“rocks and cactus” is how she described it).

She sprayed an “environmentally safe lawn paint” on her unwatered lawn, turning it a believable shade of green. As she noted, her re-greened lawn allows “birds, bugs, worms and other critters” to “still get at whatever they’re after without destroying the environment.” The paint is available from various on-line sources, ranging from Amazon.com to the web sites of large home improvement stores. One contractor, based in Thousand Oaks, offers lawn painting at \$275 per 1,000 square feet.

I researched reviews of the paint and found Ms. DiFrancesco is probably correct about important claims; the green paint is non-toxic, lasts at least three months, and will not wash off if we finally get some rain. Best of all, she attached a photo showing her large lawn adjacent to her neighbor’s. A line between green (her lawn) and brown (her neighbor’s) shows where she stopped spraying the waterborne water saver.

While I thank Ms. DiFrancesco for sharing a good drought response, her alternative might not be a long-term conservation solution. When rains return and paint wears off, many who used paint will go back to watering. In contrast, those who switched to synthetic turf or bought mulching mowers will continue to conserve. Even if we are lucky enough to someday refill our reservoirs and recharge our aquifers, saving water will always be environmentally important because saving water saves energy and reduces the pollution created through energy generation. Also, mowing grass creates waste, and even when the clippings are recycled, they require the energy expense and pollution generation associated with collection, processing into compost, and distribution.

In contrast, some vegetative groundcovers offer long lasting alternatives to lawns. Ventura County Master Gardeners can advise you on options ranging from Elfin Thyme (for full sun) to moss (for shade) to Green Carpet Ruturewort (for both). Contact the Master Gardener Help Line at 805/645-1455 or [mgventura@ucdavis.edu](mailto:mgventura@ucdavis.edu).

My parents had a landscaper remove a lawn from their front yard, change the sprinklers to drip irrigation, and plant *Dymondia margaretae* (silver carpet) ground cover. My fiancé

scored a lot of points with my parents last weekend by showing them how to replant cuttings from thick areas of the Dymondia's growth to areas where it has not covered the ground.

By the way, my fiancé's backyard has a mulch groundcover between raised beds of abundant food crops, and mine, where I do not have synthetic turf, uses Red Apple as a groundcover.

For those who do not want the expense or hassle of transforming (or painting) a lawn and seeking partial reimbursements from local water agencies, the simplest alternative for water conservation and waste prevention is to "let grass go California gold."

Encouraging this option, the Downtown Ventura Organization recently announced a "Gold is the New Green lawn contest," with prizes including a \$1,000 gift certificate for gold or other jewelry. You can keep your "eye on the environment" and enter the contest by catching the eye of your neighbors with a lawn sign calling attention to your "golden" brown lawn or drought tolerant landscape. Lawn signs, stating "Gold is the New Green," and entry forms are available at Fox Fine Jewelry, 560 East Main Street in Ventura.

*On the net:*

<http://visitventuraca.com/event/1000-00-shopping-spree-for-not-watering-your-lawn/2015-07-06/>

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