

For Eye on the Environment 6/28/15

Grasscycling: You can have your lawn and green it too

By David Goldstein, Ventura County Public Works Agency

Two weeks ago, in response to my column and other recent articles featuring praise for synthetic lawns, a letter to the editor published in the Ventura County Star raised objections. The writer questioned whether synthetic lawns really do save as much water as claimed. After all, the writer concluded, cleaning that plastic surface on a regular basis probably requires a lot of water.

I agree hosing turf requires water, but compared to lawn watering, this seems insignificant.

Another person commenting to me directly about my column expressed his belief that “real” lawns actually do not waste water. He claimed the water sprinkled on a lawn just sinks down into the water table, constituting a natural and sustainable recycling process.

Actually, the point of watering a lawn is for the water to end up in the blades of grass. When grass is cut, water ends up in garbage bins and yard waste carts. Water evaporated from lawns and clippings comes down as rainfall, ending up in our ocean. Even the little water finding its way from a lawn into a water table used for drinking still requires tremendous energy for extraction from an aquifer, filtering, and pumping back to a house.

Perhaps the real reason for such righteous defense of grassy landscapes is the sense of beauty Americans inherited from the British heritage of our country. An English country estate would never allow a “drought tolerant landscape” to stain its sacred grounds. Many of us also feel nostalgic about grassy lawns, which conjure images, smells, and textures of childhood. Practically, it is hard to beat grass as a playing surface for children.

If you will not replace grass and you refuse to “let grass go California gold” (brown) this summer, Grasscycling offers a way to keep a lawn and also keep an eye on the environment. “Grasscycling” is the term for leaving grass clippings on the lawn when mowing instead of bagging and disposing of clippings. Because grass is over 85% water and the clippings form a light layer of mulch while they decompose, correctly implemented grasscycling decreases the need to water.

Grasscycling also retains nutrients in your lawn and reduces the amount of yard waste sent to landfills or trucked to compost facilities. According to the web site of the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle), lawns can generate approximately 300 pounds of grass clippings per 1,000 square feet annually.

Successful grasscycling requires grass to be cut when the surface is dry, and mower blades must be kept sharp. Mow following the “one-third rule;” keep grass at the upper recommended cutting height for your species of grass, and cut no more than one-third of

the length of the grass blade. This will prevent clippings from covering your lawn surface. It might mean mowing more frequently in fast-growing seasons and less often when grass is growing slowly.

While you can grasscycle with almost any mower, it is wise to check your owner's manual or contact your local dealer. You may want a retrofit kit, and your dealer can assist you in choosing the correct one for your model.

Alternatively, you can purchase a "mulching mower." These models usually retain cut grass in a chamber long enough to re-cut into smaller pieces, making it easier for the cut grass to fall between grass blades left standing on the lawn.

According to the CalRecycle web site, grasscycling does not cause thatch build-up. Thatch is composed mainly of roots, stems, and other plant parts which decompose more slowly. Also, grasscycling does not spread lawn disease. Improper watering and fertilizing are the primary causes of disease spreading in lawns. Finally, grasscycling does not make a lawn look bad. If you doubt this, remember that many golf courses and parks practice grasscycling.

For grasscycling and other gardening tips, you can contact the Master Gardener Help Line, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1 PM to 4 PM, at 645-1455. You can also e-mail them at mgventura@ucdavis.edu

On the net:

<http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/organics/grasscycling/>

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