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## Artificial grass offers options during drought

By Debbie Arrington  
[darrington@sacbee.com](mailto:darrington@sacbee.com)

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No mowing and saves water, too? Synthetic turf indeed sounds like the perfect lawn for parched landscapes.

Recent technological innovations make today's fake grass look better than the real thing. Dogs like it. Neighbors can't tell the difference. And in the grips of prolonged drought, a no-water green space has its appeal.

But artificial turf may not be for every home — especially if the owner plans to sell any time soon. Some cities, including Sacramento, still prohibit its use for front yard landscaping.

Sacramento's city code specifically says "no artificial turf," says Jessica Hess of the city's utilities department. But that restriction generally is enforced only if there's a complaint.

California's prolonged drought has many cities and people looking twice at synthetic lawns and reconsidering such bans. Some cities, such as Roseville, suggest synthetic turf as part of its grass replacement initiatives.

"It is amazing that a healthy grass lawn typically requires 55 gallons of water per square foot per year," said Brian McGibbon of Fields of Green. "That is 44,000 gallons of water per year for a 800-square-foot lawn. Our products can last 15 to 20 years. That means a new 800-square-foot waterless lawn (can) save 660,000 gallons of over 15 years. Multiply that by just 50,000 homes in Sacramento and that is 33 billion gallons of water saved."

Elsewhere around the state, water districts and cities are considering rebates or other incentives for synthetic lawns. Artificial grass usually costs \$8 to \$13 per square foot installed. Most synthetic lawns last 10 to 15 years before they need renovation.

"There's no better way to immediately reduce water consumption than by installing synthetic turf," said Dominic Nappi, CEO of Back Nine Greens. "There's simply no down side. You can help

PHOTOS << ● ○ >>



Kathy Dunn

Kathy Dunn of Citrus Heights had artificial turf put in her backyard in part to accommodate geese. The turf, she said, "washes off beautifully and I can't say enough about how nice it is not to have to water it or mow it. It just sits there, looking beautiful."

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the water crisis and still have a beautiful lawn, putting green, pet area, kids play area, or any landscaping you desire.”

As the name implies, Back Nine Greens offers putting greens that never need water. Having a consistent and easy-care surface has become a synthetics’ selling point for golfers.

Sacramento radio host “Farmer” Fred Hoffman used synthetic turf to not only save water, but create a perfect putting green at his home in Herald. His wife, Jeanne, is an avid golfer.

“It is completely hassle-free,” Hoffman said of the putting green. “I clean off leaves or the nearby bark that blows onto the green with a broom or leaf blower. It still looks as good as the day we installed it (in 2011).

“We have found that during gatherings of friends and family, the putting green is more popular than the swimming pool, horseshoe pit or the bocce ball court,” he added.

Concerns over “hot feet” tempers some enthusiasm for synthetic turf.

“I love looking out onto the backyard and seeing this beautiful ‘lawn,’ ” said Pamela Maier of east Sacramento. “My only complaint is in the summer. Because the yard gets direct sunlight during the day, the product does get hot and walking on it barefoot is uncomfortable.”

But the benefits of low maintenance and no water outweigh that issue, she added. “I believe strongly that Californians must get serious about changing water usage in our landscapes. This summer will be very telling. Will we choose drinking water over green lawns?”

Concerned about hot feet, Maril O’Shaughnessy, who lives in South Land Park, tested several samples during triple-digit temperatures before picking one for her backyard during a recent renovation.

“After leaving the samples out on a 100-plus degree day for about 15 minutes, I found that ‘Cool Grass’ (from New Grass) was the only one I could stand on in bare feet,” she said. “So far, I am thrilled with my artificial grass. Going out to the backyard during summer, fall or winter, now feels like entering another room. It’s almost like having carpet.”

In some ways, artificial turf is like carpet; it’s woven from fibers.

“Today, there is much more variety and better pricing,” said McGibbon, who also serves on the Synthetic Turf Council task force to create guidelines for artificial turf. “Innovations in the last four years have led to new yarn shapes that are more durable and more resilient to foot traffic. Also, a variety of tan thatches and different face yarns give makers the flexibility to replicate different types of grass better.”

Jennifer Khal has a patch of artificial lawn installed at her garden store and nursery, the Secret Garden in Elk Grove.

“I watch customer after customer bend over to touch our turf to make sure it’s not real,” Khal said. “Not only does it look real, but it looks healthy. It’s the kind of grass you wish yours looked like; no crabgrass, no urine spots, no mud. And when it’s installed properly, as recommended, it feels great to walk on, too – soft, springy, just like a healthy lawn should.”

Khal encourages customers to think of artificial grass like carpet; it comes in many grades and installation is important. The turf itself may cost \$2 to \$5 a square foot, but proper installation adds \$6 to \$7 per square foot to that price.

Most people first see synthetic turf on football fields. As its evolved, artificial grass has gained popularity for all sorts of play areas, for people or pets.

Synthetic lawn has particular appeal to people with dogs. No more yellow spots, but what about



A screenshot of the CareerBuilder website. The logo "careerbuilder" is at the top in orange and blue. Below it is a "QUICK JOB SEARCH" section with a horizontal line. There are four input fields: "Enter Keyword(s):", "Enter a City:", "Select a State:" (with "California" selected), and "Select a Category:" (with "All Job Categories" selected). At the bottom, there are links for "Advanced Job Search" and "Search by Category".

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urine and other waste? New turf systems feature antimicrobial underlayers as part of their backing. Sublayers ensure proper drainage.

"We have two golden retrievers that love to play ball, but we did not have an area suitable as depending on the weather it was either a dust bowl or mud pit," said Sacramento's Michelle Bernstein, who installed EPS Premium Turf from Change of Seasons.

"Honestly, this is the best thing we have ever done," she added. "The dogs love it, and no more tracking in copious amounts of dirt. We love it because it looks so nice and we look brilliant because of the water restrictions. This is a large area that no longer needs water."

Kathy Dunn of Citrus Heights used artificial turf to create "my little piece of heaven" – and keep her flock happy, too.

"Since I have 21 geese and they were swimming around in a mud hole, I decided to have a pond created for them," she said. She added a gazebo and a strip of artificial turf.

"It's gone through a winter of hardly any rain, lots of frost, and lots of goose poop," she said. "It washes off beautifully and I can't say enough about how nice it is not to have to water it or mow it. It just sits there, looking beautiful."

Andrea Grenier of Roseville used synthetic lawn to solve another landscape problem: a difficult slope.

"Dragging a lawn mower up and down a steep set of steps was not going to be fun," Grenier said. "And yet I still wanted at least some lawn to provide a transition between the concrete patio slab and the terraced walls (in her backyard)."

Grenier opted for Turf Tech grass with thin blades of slightly varied height. The result looks like lush groomed grass year round – without the lawn mower.

"Even my husband has become a believer!" she said. "The neighbors think it looks great from their vantage point, too."

A downside to artificial lawn: What do you do with it in 20 years when it needs to be replaced? When it's spent, real grass breaks down into the soil; fake grass goes to the landfill.

Synthetic turf also can have an unintended impact – on possible resale of the home.

According to real estate agents, artificial grass carries a stigma. It's different. Buyers wonder: If the lawn isn't real, what else is fake?

Broker Elizabeth Weintraub of Lyon Real Estate in Sacramento shares this recent example:

"I have a seller in West Sacramento who put in a putting green in their backyard," she said. "They compacted the soil and laid (artificial) turf. As a result, they had an extremely difficult time selling their home because home buyers want grass, a real lawn. They ended up taking their home off the market."

Weintraub advised them to tear out the artificial turf before relisting.

"Bare dirt was better than fake grass," she said. "Sure enough, it sold over list price ... in one day."

"I do not advise (synthetic turf) because sellers who put in a fake lawn can be the difference between selling and not selling," Weintraub said. "Buyers are very picky in this real estate market. Even though we have very little inventory, buyers want they want, which is conformity."

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Call The Bee's Debbie Arrington, (916) 321-1075. Follow her on Twitter @debarrington.

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