Choosing the Right Lawn Option

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St Augustine grass is the most popular lawn grass in the San Antonio area because it is attractive, it is easy to mow and it has some shade tolerance. On the other side of the ledger, however, St Augustine grass is the least adapted to our soil and weather conditions, which translates to a tendency to have iron chlorosis and problems with drought. Keeping a St Augustine lawn green in a drought could mean high water bills, if enough water is even available. St Augustine grass also is the most susceptible lawn choice to disease infections and insect attacks, and it does not have good traffic tolerance. To minimize the problems of using St Augustine grass only use it when there is at least 6 inches of soil under the lawn and there is 20 to 40% shade. Another way to minimize St Augustine problems is to select the variety “Floratam”. In drought tolerance tests conducted in San Antonio by SAWS and Texas A&M it out performed all the other St Augustine selections and even the zoysia grasses. It was relatively slow to decline and quick to green-up after being denied water for 60 days.

Zoysia grass is another attractive grass selection that has some shade tolerance(less than St Augustine). You can choose between wide bladed or thin bladed zoysia selections. Zoysia grows very slowly and is difficult to mow. Mowing is less difficult if you use a reel mower. Like St Augustine, zoysia forms a thick sod that is resistant to weeds. Zoysia grass has good traffic tolerance. Zoysia requires just as much water as St Augustine to keep it green in a drought but it has a greater ability to go dormant and then recover than all of the St Augustine selections except “Floratam”.

Bermuda grass is the turf species used on most athletic fields and golf courses in Central Texas. It has excellent traffic tolerance and is attractive when mowed low. Bermuda grass does not have any shade tolerance but it is drought tolerant. Subject it to drought and it will quickly go brown but it will green up immediately after the rains or irrigation resume. Zoysia and St Augustine grasses must be established by sod but Bermuda grass can be sodded or started by seed.

Buffalo grass is the only native grass available for a permanent lawn in our area and is the most drought tolerant choice, but it is difficult to manage. Weed invasion is a constant threat because buffalo does not make a tight sod. To resist the weeds mow buffalo very high at 5 inches or taller and/or become a master at using pre-emergent herbicides. Buffalo grass requires full sun and heavy soil to prosper. It does not have good traffic tolerance. Buffalo grass can be planted by sod or seed.

If you have a new home that needs a landscape or an old landscape that needs refurbishing, you are considering which of the lawn options best suit your situation and preferences. A grass is our usual choice for the major part of a landscape, but it does not need to be. If you want to reduce time you spend maintaining the landscape, the money you spend for watering the landscape, and want a more individualistic landscape – choose some combination of hardscape, groundcovers and perennials. The landscape can have more birds, flowers, and lushness with less water. Select from among many themes including hill country, Spanish courtyard, wildscape, cottage garden, and manicured. For more ideas and specifics on low water use landscapes, visit the SAWS website at gardenstylesa@saws.org, or my archived articles at plantanswers.com.