Alternatives to Lawn Grass

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It is hard to believe that after having 10 inches more rain than the average in the first half of 2016, we are already irrigating lawns. The same thing happened in 2015. It is what happens when you have shallow, poor soil and a high evaporation rate. There is a limited soil reservoir below our lawn grass and the moisture evaporates and transpires in the heat.

Your choices in such a situation are limited. Irrigate every week and pay high water bills. Quit irrigating and if you have zoysia, Bermuda, or buffalo grass it will turn brown but recover when the rains resume. With St Augustine you will eventually have dead grass if you do not irrigate. There is another choice. Consider converting all or much of or lawn to alternative groundcovers.

Your alternative options include hardscape, groundcovers, shrubs and perennials.

Hardscape is desirable because it is easy to construct, inexpensive, easy to maintain and allows most of the same activities as a lawn.

There are a number of hardscape options. Flagstone on 4 inches of sand without mortar makes a very usable, attractive surface. The kids can ride bikes or play catch on it and the dogs can chase balls. The same flagstone on sand can be used to make a patio and walkways through a perennial garden. Decomposed granite is another attractive usable surface. Place 2 inches of the fine granite on 2 or 3 inches of caliche base. Patio blocks on sand also work well and make a more formal hardscape groundcover.

For more detailed instructions obtain the Landscape Care Guide from SAWS or visit the Landscape Website at gardenstylesa@saws.org. Most area nurseries also offer publications on constructing hardscape surfaces and the internet is loaded with information. Google “landscape hardscape”.

One of the best options for a landscape that you eventually want to be thick with flowering and or lush perennials is to apply Round-up to the turfgrass and then cover it with 6 inches of one of the sturdy mulches such as shredded brush or cedar. Make a plan for the eventual planting and the mulch will keep the weeds at bay. You can plant your perennials as your budget and schedule allow.

For examples of perennial, shrub, and groundcover options visit the San Antonio Botanical Garden to consider the Spanish Courtyard, Wildscape, Cottage Garden, Hill Country and even a manicured Xeriscape option. The distinctive features of the low water use themes can be used exclusively in a landscape, or mixed and combined.

Spanish Courtyard emphasizes expansion of the indoor living space out to patios that are decorated with plants in containers and walled beds. Wildscape selects plants to offer birds and butterflies nectar, seeds, insects, and fruit along with cover. A Hill Country landscape uses plants such as ceniza, Texas mountain laurel, and wildflowers that prosper in thin rocky soils. Cottage Garden landscapes are filled with flower beds, vegetable gardens, tough roses, and perennials that can provide 12 months of bloom. The manicured Xeriscape landscape use drought tolerant grasses, trimmed groundcovers, and well adapted shrubs with disciplined growth habits. A grass such as Bermuda grass will be allowed to go dormant in the dry months of summer.

In addition to seeking to save water and money, one of the best reasons to select a non-turf landscape is because you are blessed with lots of shade. Even St Augustine grass, our most shade tolerant lawngrass, requires sun 50 to 60% of the day to prosper. Have less sun than that and your grass thins out to the point where it is mostly bare ground (or weeds that have filled in the bare soil).

There are a number of choices of shade tolerant groundcovers. Consider Asiatic jasmine, dwarf Mexican petunia, blueshade ruellia, mondo grass, English ivy, or liriope for low growing groundcovers. For taller options look at shrimp plant, Turks cap, dwarf Chinese holly, and low-growing nandina. One of the best places to see the shade-tolerant groundcovers in action is the King William District. The homes in this neighborhood have lots of trees providing shade and creative combinations of shade tolerant groundcovers making for beautiful landscapes.