

In Los Angeles, the Grass Isn't Always Greener This Year

[nytimes.com/2022/08/15/us/los-angeles-lawn-watering-drought.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/us/los-angeles-lawn-watering-drought.html)

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AGOURA HILLS, Calif. — Erin Brockovich made her name decades ago as an environmental activist who exposed corporate wrongdoing that polluted drinking water.

So she felt a bit defensive when a television reporter asked how her name landed on a list of water guzzlers during a dire California drought. At one point last year, she received a \$1,700 bill for two months of water and fines.

Ms. Brockovich ultimately decided she had to get rid of her lawn, a central part of the backyard oasis she had built over more than two decades living in Agoura Hills, a suburb of large homes with immaculate yards about 40 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. She replaced 3,100 square feet of grass with high-tech artificial turf.

“This is not a fire drill, and every one of us has to participate,” she said. “We have to get past the blame and sadness of it.”

Image



A sprinkler in Agoura Hills, Calif. Credit...Mark Abramson for The New York Times

For the better part of a century, the lawn has been one of Southern California's most durable middle-class fantasies: a single-family house with a manicured emerald yard that always remains lush — even in the dead of summer when much of the region's native vegetation is golden brown.

But as climate change exposes the limits of the water supply, homeowners and water officials say the end of the thirsty lawn may finally be here.

Where residents once looked askance at any yard that resembled a desert diorama, there are now parades of gravel beds studded with cacti, native plant gardens and artificial turf. The change reflects a different kind of neighborly peer pressure, supercharged by stringent new water restrictions that took effect in June.

Over most of the past year, 300 applicants a month sought rebates that paid homeowners to swap out grass, according to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which distributes water to utilities serving 19 million people. In May, the number jumped to 870. By June, it was almost 1,400.

Many don't even need cash incentives. A recent study by the water agency found that for every 100 homeowners who took advantage of rebates, an additional 132 nearby also made the switch.

- **A Declining Reservoir:** The Colorado River, which carved the Grand Canyon over millions of years, is now in crisis from climate change and overuse.
- **Halting Construction:** Arizona officials have determined that there is not enough groundwater for all of the housing construction that has already been approved in the Phoenix area, and will stop developers from building some new subdivisions.
- **Desalination Plants:** A \$5 billion plan to pipe treated seawater from Mexico to Phoenix is under serious consideration, an indication of how worries about water shortages are rattling policymakers across the American West.

In Woodland Hills, a neighborhood of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley, where temperatures are routinely hotter than along the coast, Alex Hoffmaster and Camilla Jessen recently bought a ranch house with a dead lawn. Rather than revive it, they decided to install decomposed granite and native plants, inspired by a family across the street.

“Having a lawn up here in the Valley is completely nonsensical,” said Ms. Jessen, 45, as she maneuvered her 5-month-old son, Scout, into a sliver of shade on a recent 100-degree afternoon.

Image



Inspired by neighbors, Camilla Jessen and Alex Hoffmaster recently replaced their dead lawn with environmentally friendly landscaping that included decomposed granite and native plants. Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

Image



Ms. Jessen said that having a lawn in the San Fernando Valley, where temperatures are typically hotter than they are at the coast, is “completely nonsensical.” Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

A few blocks away, Jerry Landsdowne, 71, surveyed the small lawn outside the home he bought in 1997. Patches had begun to look beige and dry.

“The care I used to show towards the lawn,” he said, shaking his head. He fondly recalled how for a decade, he would mow the grass for an older neighbor, one of the few remaining World War II veterans in the community. Repayment consisted of a beer enjoyed in the shade of a Mulberry tree.

But Mr. Landsdowne said he has recently considered replacing his grass as the drought slogs on.

Nearby, Hollywood long exported a vision of the American dream that included a tidy house with fastidiously maintained lawn. (Picture “The Brady Bunch” kids bounding out the sliding kitchen door of their house — modeled on a real one in the San Fernando Valley — and onto a perennially verdant backyard.)

Despite that portrayal, the region has a patchwork of communities with varying landscaping conventions. Many neighborhoods in Los Angeles have yards that would be considered tiny by people in, say, the Midwest, and dirt lots or concrete are hardly unusual.

Still, real grass often reigns in affluent neighborhoods.

In Hancock Park, a historic enclave in the center of Los Angeles, Bill Newby, 65, said that sloping lawns were essential to his community's identity.

"We see people coming into this neighborhood all the time, jogging through," he said. "Halloween here is delightful."

While Mr. Newby said he was working to follow the city's watering restrictions — two assigned days per week — he found them frustrating.

Image



Erin Brockovich replaced 3,100 square feet of grass with high-tech artificial turf. Credit...Mark Abramson for The New York Times

"I don't think that watering lawns a couple days a week is a major use of water, relative to agriculture and golf courses," he said. "I kind of scratch my head and say, 'We've all got to do our part. However, is this an easy target?'"

Experts say that getting rid of lawns alone will not solve the state's water problem. And there are persistent debates about who should shoulder more painful cuts: residents of California's cities, where per capita water usage has steadily decreased, or farmers, who say they grow food for the nation.

Southern California's rise was predicated on ready access to water. The Los Angeles Aqueduct, which opened in 1913, ushered millions of gallons from the Owens River Valley across more than 200 miles to what would rapidly become the nation's second most populous city — an engineering triumph that defied nature.

Los Angeles's growth over the following decades coincided with a booming middle class whose aspirations of suburban homesteading trace back to the English countryside. There, lawns were an early means of displaying conspicuous wealth among the landed gentry, said Christopher Sellers, a history professor at Stony Brook University who has written about lawns in the United States.

American horticulturalists developed heartier hybrids of grass designed to survive in warmer, drier climes, though they still needed regular watering. And the lawn made its way west to California, where it took hold as what Mr. Sellers described as “the cultural norm, the expectation.”

The vast Los Angeles region was built on the idea that everybody can own a plot of land with a lawn and driveway. Yet one need only glimpse at nearby nature preserves to see what plants would otherwise thrive here.

Image



Evan Meyer's nonprofit runs a nursery that grows native plants that can thrive in today's climate conditions, an increasingly appealing option among residents. Credit...Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times



One of the nursery's offerings: California buckwheat. Credit...Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

On a recent sweltering afternoon, Evan Meyer trekked up a winding dirt path in Sun Valley, another Los Angeles neighborhood, and paused on a flat hilltop to look at a sweeping vista. He leads the Theodore Payne Foundation, a nonprofit that runs an increasingly popular native plant nursery.

In the foreground, Mr. Meyer pointed out the mottled khaki and rust-colored expanse of the Verdugo Mountains. In the background loomed the Santa Monica Mountains, covered with coastal sage scrub.

“And then we’re seeing the urban environment of the San Fernando Valley,” he said, gesturing to the area in between: dense, varied green textures, broken up by the gray-white of stucco and ribbons of asphalt. Almost none of the plants, he said, “were selected for any other reason than ‘What’s the easiest or what’s the prettiest?’”

Over the decades, the lawn’s supremacy has weathered cycles of drought and rain. Because of climate change, though, droughts have become more frequent and intense.

“The new drought is a hot drought,” said Ellen Hanak, director of the Public Policy Institute of California’s Water Policy Center. “We have to be ready for it to get acute quickly.”

Gavin Newsom, the governor of California, last year pleaded with residents to cut back voluntarily. But water use in some parts of the state actually increased, and Mr. Newsom this year said he would impose mandatory restrictions if water agencies could not get people to conserve. “This is a wake-up call,” Adel Hagekhalil, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District, said in April when outlining new watering restrictions. According to the district, Southern California water agencies have met and exceeded conservation goals since the rules went into effect. Customers of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power used 11 percent less water last month than they did in July 2021.

Image



The grounds of the Theodore Payne Foundation. Credit... Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

A recent survey by P.P.I.C. found that 51 percent of Los Angeles residents said they and their families had done a lot to reduce water use, the highest figure in the state. Yet 70 percent of Los Angeles residents said people there still weren't doing enough.

Around the region, landscapers who specialize in drought-tolerant plants and artificial turf say they are scrambling to keep up with demand. “I feel like an analogy is it's Covid and we're the only ones with the masks,” said Mitchell Katz, the owner of Camarillo-based Turf Exchange, which has replaced grass with artificial turf for nearly a decade.

Ms. Brockovich was among Mr. Katz's customers, a full convert to artificial turf, which she said looks and feels nothing like older versions of fake grass, with no unsettling coloring.

While such turf eliminates the need for watering, it must be replaced roughly every 20 years, generating plastic waste. That environmental cost has disqualified it from the M.W.D. rebate program.

At the Theodore Payne Foundation nursery, families browsed the rows of narrow leaf milkweed and sage, herbal and earthy scents heavy in the hot air.

Lorna Estrada, 50, and her daughter, Sienna Kochakji, 13, had come from the Lake Balboa neighborhood of the San Fernando Valley to do some “window shopping,” as Ms. Estrada put it. A fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Estrada said she had taught her students about the drought and climate change. She said she wanted to undertake an outdoor project with Sienna.

So, after 15 years of weighing the idea, she said, “We’re finally letting our lawn go.”

Mr. Meyer said he hoped that someday soon, the San Fernando Valley region would look more like the natural landscapes through which so many Angelenos love to hike. He added the drought is catalyzing the transition.

“A lawn is basically a big, sterile green carpet that uses a lot of water to maintain,” he said. “We’re advocating for a future where our urban spaces blend seamlessly with their natural environments.”