HOW DO WE GET RID OF OUR LAWN?

All of us gardeners are deeply aware of how a simple issue like WATER impacts our lives, and most especially our gardens. Water and its availability determines the size and the type of garden we can install. It dictates the plants we buy. None of us in Sonoma County, or indeed California, can ignore what's happening around us in regards to the issue of water...where to get it, how much of it we can have or use, how we dispose of "used" water. We shouldn't even call it "wastewater" any more because we can no longer afford to waste it. Recycling our resources is, of course, the only answer, and many of us are working in that direction.

Green lawns have become a relic of wastewater-thinking. The energy, pesticides, chemical fertilizers and resources that go in to maintaining a lawn are becoming unthinkable. Many of us would like to get rid of our lawns and transform them into say, a habitat-for-wildlife garden, a vegetable garden, or a native California or Mediterranean (drought tolerant) yard. How do we get rid of our lawn?

There are two methods espoused by wildlife habitat or native California plant gardeners that do the job fairly easily.

The most time consuming is using a sod cutter. Sod is often installed with netting beneath it, which makes the sod cutter necessary. Cut the sod, roll it up, and let it compost, later using the piles of sod as mounds for gardening on, around, or beside. This method involves more effort than the second method, but is often used for removing large areas of grass.

A seeded lawn could be rototilled if the area is large. However, the weight and pressure of the tiller or the tractor can compact the soil. And rototilling disturbs the balance of soil organisms already at work and brings weed seeds to the surface. It should be avoided if at all possible.

The second method is called "sheet composting". A thin layer of oyster shell or gypsum is first spread over the lawn. Either material provides calcium for healthier soil and helps to break up clay soils and improves drainage.

Next a thick layer of newspaper or sheets of cardboard, which are thoroughly wetted, is laid atop the calcium. Newspaper is pretty easy to come by; cardboard can be found in recycling dumpsters at most grocery or natural foods stores and many businesses. It's easier to spread the newspapers if they are damp. Cardboard is quite effective if there is Bermuda grass in the lawn. The newspaper and cardboard become fodder for earthworms.

Approximately 4 inches of organic mulch is laid over the wet newspaper. You can purchase, for instance, "early mulch" from Sonoma Compost, which is an inexpensive, partially broken-down compost. Arbor chips would be okay, but not bark mulch.
The grass consequently breaks down over a period of about four weeks, further enriching the soil. Keep the whole sandwich wet through to the newspaper if it’s not receiving rain.

TO PLANT: this is the easy and the fun part. It’s easy to dig a hole through the mulch and put in the plant. If you have to add some soil or compost to the hole, do so at that time. Of course, planning the plant selection, laying it all out, and shopping for the plants involves some prior thought and consideration. You can work on that while the sheet mulching is doing its magic.

Sheet mulching is a great process to use in transforming a weed-ridden area into a garden. Cut the weeds to the ground, cover with the calcium, and maybe add at this point a layer of leaves, manure or compost, then the wet cardboard and paper and the 4 inches of mulch. The problem with using straw as compost is that it introduces so many, both quantity and type, of weed seeds. If you can find rice straw, use that. Leaves if available are great, and so is alfalfa.

To recap: the goal is to smother the grass and to enrich the soil with the least amount of labor on your part.

By Judy Brinkerhoff