

Help Desk FAQs

Summer 2022

Question 2 - How Do I remove my lawn for a more water-wise garden?

We would like to make our landscape more water-wise and are considering removing our lawn, but it seems like such a huge project, we aren't sure where to begin. Please help!

Answer 2

Believe it or not, it is still possible to have a beautiful green space without a lawn, and with a lot less water use and work once your new landscape is in. The first step in this journey is developing a plan. This will include deciding what parts of your current landscape you will save, whether you wish to add hardscape (a path or benches, for example) when and how you will remove the lawn, how you will irrigate your future landscape, and the fun part, what you want to plant once your lawn is gone.¹

There are several ways to remove lawns. Before you choose, look at your lawn. A lawn that is fairly weed-free and stays green all winter is easily removed using the most environmentally friendly option, sheet mulching.^{2,3} Any changes you plan to make to your irrigation system should be completed before you sheet mulch. To sheet mulch, cut your lawn as short as possible, and make a beveled cut about six inches all around the edges of the lawn so that you have room to cover this area with mulch without it spilling onto pavement. Next, cover the lawn with overlapping layers of newspaper, then cardboard, and top it with several inches of mulch. Once this is done, you must wait several months for the cardboard and lawn to compost before you plant.

Other lawn removal methods with greater environmental impact include mechanical removal (lots of physical work and green waste) or herbicide removal (risk to nearby plants). The herbicide method works best for old lawns that are mostly weeds. Unfortunately, sheet mulching and mechanical methods will not kill the most persistent weeds or warm-weather grasses, such as Bermuda grass, nutsedge, oxalis, field bindweed, or other tough-to-kill weeds.³ If you choose to use an herbicide, be sure to carefully follow the label directions. The references listed below will give you more information as you begin this water-conserving project.

1. <https://water.ca.gov/Water-Basics/Conservation-Tips/Removing-Your-Lawn>
2. <https://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/news/break-up-with-your-lawn-using-cardboard>
3. https://ucanr.edu/sites/sacmg/Beyond_Lawn/