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Arid Southwest Cities' Plea: Lose the Lawn

By IAN LOVETT

[LOS ANGELES](#) — This is how officials here feel about grass these days: since 2009, the city has paid \$1.4 million to homeowners willing to rip out their front lawns and plant less thirsty landscaping.

At least the lawns are still legal here. Grass front yards are banned at new developments in [Las Vegas](#), where even the grass medians on the Strip have been replaced with synthetic turf.

In Austin, Tex., lawns are allowed; watering them, however, is not — at least not before sunset. Police units cruise through middle-class neighborhoods hunting for sprinklers running in daylight and issuing \$475 fines to their owners.

Worried about dwindling [water supplies](#), communities across the drought-stricken Southwest have begun waging war on a symbol of suburban living: the lush, [green grass](#) of front lawns.

In hopes of enticing, or forcing, residents to abandon the scent of freshly cut grass, cities in this parched region have offered homeowners ever-increasing amounts to replace their lawns with drought-resistant plants; those who keep their grass face tough watering restrictions and fines for leaky sprinklers.

These efforts are drastically reshaping the landscape, with cactuses and succulents taking over where green grass once reigned.

“The era of the lawn in the West is over,” said Paul Robbins, the director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the [University of Wisconsin](#). “The water limits are insurmountable, unless the Scotts Company develops a genetically modified grass that requires almost no water. And I’m sure it’s keeping them up at night.”

City officials across the region have hailed turf removal as vital, given the chronic water shortages.

In Mesa, Ariz., the city has paid to turn nearly 250,000 square feet of residential lawn into desertscape.

More than one million square feet of grass has been moved from Los Angeles residences since the rebate program began here in 2009. New parks provide only token patches of grass, surrounded by native plants. Outside City Hall, what was once a grassy park has been transformed into a garden of succulents.

The first five months of this year were the driest on record in California, with reservoirs in the state at 20 percent below normal levels. The lawn rebate program here will save approximately 47 million gallons of water each year, according to the [Los Angeles Department of Water and Power](#).

But some residents worry that turf removal has already gone too far, robbing children of play spaces.

“It’s getting to the point where kids live in apartments, and they don’t even see grass, except in magazines,” said Betty Humphrey of Los Angeles. She raised her son with an expansive lawn, and said her family would not be pulling up its grass no matter how much money the city offered.

The city is already short on green space, said Ms. Humphrey, 63. “I don’t want to end up like New York or Chicago, with no grass.”

Las Vegas presents a model of how quickly the landscape can change when a city moves aggressively. In 2003, after a drought wiped out the city’s water resources, the [Las Vegas Valley Water District](#) offered what officials believe was the first turf removal rebate program in the country.

Since then, the water district has paid out nearly \$200 million to remove 165.6 million square feet of grass from residences and businesses.

In the winter, watering is allowed only one day a week. Homeowners who take advantage of the city’s rebate must sign a deed restriction stating that

even if the property were to be sold, grass could not be reinstalled unless the new owner paid back the rebate, with interest.

Residents of the country's driest city take the rules seriously. "Neighbors turn each other in if they see a sprinkler running," said Patricia Mulroy, the general manager of the Las Vegas [Valley Water](#) District.

The city's investment has paid off, Ms. Mulroy said. In the last decade, 9.2 billion gallons of water have been saved through turf removal, and water use in Southern Nevada has been cut by a third, even as the population has continued to grow.

"The landscape in Southern Nevada has changed dramatically," she said. "If you had driven through a single-family development in the 1990s, it would have had grass all the way around. Today, you find desert landscaping. You see very little grass."

Residential neighborhoods without lawns would have been considered downright heretical just two decades ago, said Diana Balmori, a landscape architect and an author of "Redesigning the American Lawn."

"Americans were ultra-lawn people, and the lawn industry applied them to every part of the country, regardless of climate," she said. "The lawn was seen as good for children. It's one of the only plants that can take traffic on it. It's a very soft surface. Frankly, it has no equal."

But the idea that extensive grass lawns are wasteful has now taken hold with many people in this region, especially the young and environmentally conscious.

And municipalities, hoping those savings can be expanded, have tried to entice more residents to dig up their lawns by offering more money. Last month, Los Angeles raised its rebate to \$2 from \$1.50 a square foot of grass removed. Long Beach now offers \$3 a square foot.

Jessica Seglar and her fiancé had considered getting rid of their grass in Long Beach for years. But it was an expensive proposition. Once they heard

about the rebate, they decided to replace the lawn with [Ceanothus](#), a lilac native to California, and other drought-tolerant plants.

“It’s absolutely the responsible thing to do,” said Ms. Seglar, 30. “Right now, it’s a space we’re not using much that’s just sucking up water.”

The Scotts Miracle-Gro Company, one of the most prominent players in the turf-grass industry, is in fact working to develop varieties of grass that require less water, but that also maintain the soft feel and durability of Kentucky bluegrass. Mike Sutterer, the company’s vice president for marketing in the Southwest, listed more environmental benefits a lawn offers: it cools the air, provides oxygen and prevents erosion and storm water [runoff](#), a major problem in Los Angeles.

“We want to give consumers an option,” Mr. Sutterer said. “That way, they still get the benefits of grass while also using less water.”

And many people, even those who recognize the importance of conserving water, are not yet ready to abandon the traditional American front lawn. While Ms. Seglar was excited about putting in her drought-tolerant yard, she acknowledged that it would not be very child friendly, and she and her fiancé want to have children. “A backyard is a nice place to throw a ball and run around,” she said. “Someday, we plan on moving to a place with a more usable lawn.”