

I Used to Have a Lawn But Now I Have Less

This post is in response to the new [Lawn Reform blog](#) and the "[I Used to Have a Lawn But Now I Have...](#)" competition. What a great idea. There is so much to share. My gardening journey is one that moves away from the old-fashioned, and to me, boring grass-dominated yard. There are so many more interesting things one can do with the land. Still, I haven't gotten rid of all of it and don't plan to. At the risk of being flogged by some of my co-bloggers, grass is cool, clean, soft, and fun to sit on and run on. My dog, Milo, loves to roll on it, and it makes a comfy place to take care of necessities. It is also boring, water-sucking, and status-seeking. And so I balance between these. I may someday become grass-free, but not yet.

In 1998 we moved into a 90 year old craftsman house. The corner lot is a third of an acre. Five mature trees (3 avocados, a deodar and a coast live oak) were set in lawns of St. Augustine and Bermuda grass. Borders of thirsty impatiens added color but required a lot of water. The challenge was to reduce the lawn area and increase habitat without damaging the trees. My approach has been to gradually reduce the lawn giving the trees plenty of time to adjust to the new landscape.

These are the gardens that I have created over the past ten years:

Sidewalk garden (936 sq. ft.): Rapidly tiring of mowing and edging this 6' wide by 166' long strip between the sidewalk and street, I tore this out first. It now features bunch grasses and coastal sage scrub plants including wild sages, buckwheat, deergrass, needlegrass and a brilliant selection of spring wildflowers.

Woodland garden (500 sq. ft.): Located in a private corner of the yard, under the shade of the deodar, this small space is planted with riparian woodland species including wild currants and gooseberries, ferns, snowberry, toyons and clematis, all softly covered with organic leaf mulch from the rest of the yard.

Oak woodland garden (500 sq. ft.): Beneath the large volunteer oak, approximately 60 years old, and beyond its canopy are manzanitas, toyon, tree anemone, lemonade berry and holly-leaf cherry which will help screen the chain link fence and provide privacy from the next door property. The original grassy area beneath the oak was slowly abandoned as the irrigation schedule changed from weekly all year long to an occasional deep watering when the winter is dry.

East garden, backyard (576 sq. ft.): Entering the yard from a gate off the east side of the property the previously grassed area was allowed to go fallow for the past few years. It is a high visibility area with good sun exposure, yet it has looked like a mulch pile for too long. Located close to the back door and the kitchen it is in the process of be converted into a pleasant passage way to a green pond (oval-shaped lawn in the far back) and an edible garden along the sides. The challenge: how to keep Milo from watering the lettuce!

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Far back yard (1600 sq. ft.): This area will keep some of its original lawn. The roughly 40' by 40' square now has an oval "pond" of St. Augustine grass. On the north side, the garden has pushed its way into the grass by about 5'. Large flannelbush shrubs screen the fence and provide bright yellow flowers in spring. Deergrass has been planted to transition from the east garden to the green pond. An old Mexicali avocado occupies the north east corner. Green debris and the compost bin live back there as well. A coast live oak sapling is growing in the area, ready to replace the avocado when it succumbs to old age or disease.

Similarly, the lawn in the front yard has been on the retreat, but I will describe this at another time.

The resulting gardens have reduced the lawn area by over 42%. My plans are to continue the assault on the lawn, though my goal is not total annihilation.

Here are a few before and after pictures:

Woodland Garden

Before and After (297 sq. ft.)



December 2004



August 2005: Milo surveys his work.

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July 2007

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August 2008



East Garden

And now for a garden in progress. The east garden, as mentioned above, was covered with Bermuda grass and served as a passage from the house to the far back on the east side of the deck. The grass is gone and I have decided to make it an edible garden. I bought some cool season veggies, like lettuce, swiss chard, and celery. It is way too hot to plant so the 6-packs (shown in picture) are actually sitting on the back porch. Several challenges here include taking advantage of an area that gets full sun in summer and only some morning and afternoon sun in winter. Milo frequents this area so I need to make sure the edibles are out of his range - if you know what I mean. The area needs to transition from the woodland garden and deck garden to the far back "green pond." It is central to the yard and highly visible right when you enter from the side. I will keep posting as I make changes.

Then and now - can't use before and after because we aren't at after yet: (576 square feet)

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January 2006: lawn with new fence. The beginning of the end for the grass.

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July 2007, vacant lot look. Experimenting with temporary path made of 18" long logs (lower left side), major failure.

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September 2009: temporary logs mark new path, raised bed for veggies and 6-packs waiting for heat wave to end before they are put in the ground (they are being sheltered on the porch for now), containers with herbs in front.

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For other posts on lawn reduction.

[A Native Garden Can Taste Good Too](#)

[Planning the Paths in the East Garden](#)

[Planning for the Fall Planting Season](#)

[More Grass Will Disappear in Front Yard](#)

[Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lawn](#)