

## Reduce, Reuse, Recycle in the Garden

Economic realities are staring us in the face. Human activities are contributing to warming temperatures resulting in less snow at lower elevations of the Sierra Nevadas. The holidays are approaching at a rapid pace. With autumn in full color and the gardening season winding down, it might be a good time to stop and reflect on some ways to use less and save a little more.

**Reduce your lawn.** Consider reducing the area you have devoted to grass. Perhaps it's beautiful to look at, but less might just be more—less effort, less disease, less water, less synthetic fertilizer. There are several ways to accomplish this.

You might enlarge the space you have allowed around the base of trees, particularly all our drought-happy oaks. Cut away the sod and add it to your compost heap. Don't plant these areas; just fill with your choice of mulch. This will focus the attention on the tree rather than on the bed beneath it.

How about enlarging the garden beds that are contiguous to the lawn? Lay out your garden hose to imagine another two feet or more of beds. If you've wanted to try some new low-growing perennials, this might be the time. Cut the new edge, lift the sod, turn over and chop, chop, chop. Let the old sod create compost, and by next spring, it will be ready to plant. In the meantime you can be reading the catalogs and making your selections.

**Speaking of catalogs: Reduce junk mail.** If you really don't want all those credit card and insurance offers, "opt out" every time your financial service provider gives you the chance. Call or log on and ask them not to share your information. Go to Catalog Choice [www.catalogchoice.org](http://www.catalogchoice.org) and request to be taken off the list of catalogs you don't wish to receive. Not all catalogs participate, but the ones that do will stop sending you unwanted mail. You'll be saving paper and trees.

**Reuse items in the garden.** Another approach for reducing lawn size is to create a display area for garden sculpture. Again, use your hose to lay out a pleasing shape. Remove the sod, fill the area with mulch, and place the object for all to admire. It could be a true sculpture—there are many advertised in garden publications—or a relic of old farms equipment or some handsome rocks.

Use old pieces of furniture or other cast-offs as garden art and planting containers. An old bowling ball or rusted bits of metal that have interesting shapes can become whimsical garden art. A battered wooden or metal chair can hold a planter or become one. Shop garage sales for inexpensive items that can be turned into wonderful assets for the garden. Look for pots, glazed and/or clay, old birdhouses, rusted metal farm tools, old gardening tools, and even broken statuary. Old metal headboards and footboards can be placed in the garden with plants creating the 'bed.' Recycle pots and saucers into a water source for wildlife or a water feature. Let your imagination be your guide.

**Recycle organic matter: compost.** Master Gardeners encourage composting on-site to return nutrients to the soil from where they came. Raking and burning leaves or hauling your fire-safe prunings to the slash site only removes nutrients from your soil that then must be replaced by artificial means. Create your own compost and mulch—the savings on purchased compost and fertilizers may even pay for the rental of a chipper for a day. Or band together with neighbors and make use of the grant-funded Highway

108 FireSafe Council program that will chip your green waste on site for \$50/hour. Go to their website at <http://www.tuolumnefiresafe.org/> to learn more.

**Capture your rainwater on site to reduce water used for irrigation.** A Tuolumne County Master Gardener can provide information on rainwater catch systems. Call the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener office at 533-5696 for more information. Or pick up the books Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands and Beyond, Volumes 1 and 2, by Brad Lancaster. An author from Arizona, Brad recommends planting native and adapted plants in small depressions to take advantage of the local weather patterns. His plantings do not need additional irrigation beyond what they receive in rainfall. He also recommends creating earthwork patterns to move water slowly through the lawn and garden, allowing water to percolate through the soil, rather than running off.

**Other ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle:**

**Plant a tree.** You'll help reduce carbon dioxide—a greenhouse gas—in the atmosphere (carbon sequestration).

**Replace a light bulb.** Exchange an incandescent bulb for a long-lived fluorescent one. You'll help reduce energy use in your home, thus requiring less energy generation from the burning of fossil fuels and other sources.

**Remove a noxious weed.** Pull some ivy; remove your vinca, or tear out a volunteer broom plant (maybe even one that you planted in error). Plant a California native or something edible in its place. Hand pull a patch of yellow star thistle.

**Don't drive.** Set aside one day to only walk or ride your bike (non-motorized transportation). Stay home and burn less fuel.

**Bring your own bag.** We've all seen the plastic bags from local retailers blowing alongside highways or stuck in trees and shrubs. Carry your groceries in a reusable tote.

**Use your own mug.** According to the [www.earthday.net](http://www.earthday.net) website, each year Americans throw away 25,000,000,000 (that's 25 BILLION) Styrofoam cups. 500 years from now that Styrofoam cup you used will still be sitting in a landfill.

Of course, we've just scratched the surface about ways to be "care-full" of our gardens and landscapes. If you have additional suggestions or would like to request more information, please contact the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardeners at 533-5696.

*This article is a collaborative effort, involving the ideas and writings of Marlys Bell, Joan Bergsund, Al Dahlstrand, Carolee James, and Rebecca Miller-Cripps.*