

Water Wise Buffalo Grass

by Carolee James

While we have had some water and the snow pack looks good, California is still considered to be in drought conditions. Many gardeners face the dilemma of what will happen to their gardens and, especially their turf lawns, if water rationing becomes a reality this summer. Many garden plants will survive with a shortage of water, but turf lawns will not. To stay green and healthy they need water...and lots of it! But, a lawn of buffalo grass will do just fine with just ¼ inch of water per week during our highest temperatures.

During the last Tuolumne County master gardener demonstration garden Open Garden Day, Mike Connelly, from Florasource, Ltd., a distributor of 'UC Verde' buffalo grass, was in the garden answering questions about this alternative to turf lawn. The number of people who were in the garden seeking information about buffalo grass attests to its rising popularity.

When we planted our test plots of buffalo grass in the Master Gardener demonstration garden, we choose two varieties: 'Legacy' and 'UC Verde.' Both are doing well, just now coming out of dormancy, yet Mike suggested that the variety 'Prestige' would do better for our elevations, from 1200 to 6000 ft. We plan to add a test plot of 'Prestige' to the garden within the next two months. 'Legacy' is better suited, we learned, to elevations above 6000 ft.

'Prestige' was developed by the University of Nebraska and became available in 2004. It was the top rated buffalo grass in the latest national evaluation program. This grass is medium green in color and grows 4-6 inches tall with a dense stand of turf. If left unmowed it will reach 3-8 inches.

'UC Verde' was developed by the University of California Riverside and Davis. It produces a dense turf of soft, bright-green, very fine leaf blades that will grow to a maximum height of 4-8 inches if left unmowed. Most of the visitors to the garden prefer this grass due to its fine leaf blades. 'UC Verde' is best suited to lower elevations under 1200 feet.

Why consider buffalo grasses over turf lawn? Let's compare:

Water:

Buffalo grass requires ¼ inch a week during our hot summers. Once the plugs in our test plots began growing they were only watered once every two weeks.

Turf requires several inches of water at least twice a week.

Mowing:

Buffalo grass needs to be mowed once in spring to 1 inch to remove old grass debris which allows the sun to warm the soil and green-up the grass. Additional mowings, perhaps two or three, are required if you don't want a 'meadow' look for your buffalo grass. Our test plots will be mowed within the next few weeks for the first time.

Turf requires mowing once a week to look its best.

Chemical Applications:

Growers recommend a spring application of fertilizer for **buffalo grass** with a repeat application in the summer at ½ the recommended rate. Buffalo grasses resist pest and diseases,

therefore require no pesticide use. Herbicide use—such as a pre-emergent when first planted—is suggested, but not mandatory. However, if you plant ‘UC Verde,’ weed control may not be necessary as this grass seems to have a natural ability to inhibit weed growth. To date, our test plots have not been fertilized, nor were they treated with pre-emergents when planted in May 2008.

Turf lawns require regular use of fertilizers and herbicides to maintain their lush carpet-like look. Pesticides are often used to control lawn insects and diseases. Overuse of these chemicals is, unfortunately, more common than one would think.

Exposure:

Turf lawns will grow in full sun and some varieties will grow in shade.

Buffalo grasses require at least 6 hours of sun a day. They will not grow in full shade.

Other:

Buffalo grass will withstand pets and heavy traffic. They are virtually pollen free and no mowing or watering is needed during the winter months. Buffalo grasses go dormant in the winter and turn a light beige in color. (Personally, I find the color a perfect foil for the winter landscape, so I consider this a benefit.)

Many **turf** varieties will stay green year round. However, turf may be damaged by pets, some allergies are associated with turf lawns and not all species can withstand heavy traffic.

To see our test plots, plan to attend Open Garden Day, April 4th, at the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener Demonstration Garden, 251 N. Barretta Street in Sonora. We will decide whether to fertilize one or both existing plots to test how well the grasses do with each treatment.

‘UC Verde’ can be ordered through Florasouce, Ltd. located in San Clemente. Contact them at 949-498-1131 or email: mail@florasource.com. The grass is shipped from a California grower. Information sheets and order forms are available at the Demonstration Garden on Open Garden Days. The order forms provide information to calculate the number of plugs to order for the area you want to plant.

‘Prestige’ can be ordered from Todd Valley Farms in Nebraska. They have a great website at toddvalleyfarms.com. The site also provides information on how to measure your yard, prepare your soil, install plugs and maintain your buffalo grass.

Buffalo grasses can make a beautiful green statement in your garden without ‘gulping’ down buckets of water. Their winter coat of beige adds a relaxed look to a wintry landscape. And, instead of mowing you can be out doing more exciting activities!

Carolee James is preparing an area of her garden for her new plot of ‘Prestige.’ Her four-legged companions will be so happy to have some grass on which to roll!!