

Reduce Your Lawn to Cut Water Bills

**by Joan Bergsund,
UCCE Master Gardener**

Have you watched with alarm as your water bill soared this summer? Assuming that much of the water is used on your lawn, consider reducing the area you have devoted to grass. Perhaps it's beautiful to look at, but less might just be more. 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 been wanting 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 fall or next spring, it will be ready to plant. In the meantime you can be reading the catalogs and making your selections.

An excellent planning catalog that speaks to the conditions we have in the foothills is "**High Country Gardens**," located in Santa Fe, New Mexico (free 2009 fall catalog is hot off the presses). Besides the enticing photographs, they offer good descriptions of plant growth habits and indicate which plants are deer and rabbit resistant, how much water they require, and whether the plant needs sun or shade. Call 800-925-9387. You can **check out their website: highcountrygardens.com**.

- You could also **create a new bed like an island within the lawn**. Think green and low maintenance. Try planting a variety of shrubs with different colors and textures. Be sure all your selections require about the same amount of water and sun. You'll be surprised what an interesting bed you will have created. The "look" will be quiet, serene, and even elegant—in contrast to your colorful beds elsewhere.
- Another approach for the island within the lawn would be 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 farm equipment or some handsome rocks. Let your imagination be your guide.

- If your lawn is flat, you could create a **bocce ball, croquet or volleyball court** to reduce the grassy area. Again, cut out the sod and add to the compost pile. With a tidy edge, and lots of raking, you'll create a smooth flat bed of soil so the games can begin. This entails some work, but no watering! If you get inspired, you could add decomposed granite for the playing surface.
- A more ambitious project would be to **create a labyrinth** within the lawn. Webster defines this word as a devious arrangement of linear patterns forming a design, and anything that is bewildering by its complexity. We envision a circular area, with paths that twist and turn leading eventually into the center and out again, the purpose being to allow slow meandering and meditating. This project will require more time and effort on your part, but the results will be worth it.

Entering a labyrinth from the outside, you pad slowly along paths of tamped earth or decomposed granite, walking gently to and fro, in and out, until you reach the center...and then return. Think of a metaphor for life—we know not where our individual paths will lead. **For more information on labyrinths, read “Walking a Sacred Path” by Lauren Artress.** You'll learn that labyrinths, as ancient paths to wisdom and peace, have been with us for around 4500 years and exist across all cultures.

All of these suggestions will require some alterations in the irrigation system, if there is one. You'll be delighted with a new feature in your garden, which will reduce your dependence upon water. And you'll love your shrinking water bill.

Joan Bergsund, a master gardener since 1994, created several paths in her own garden by cutting through some mountain misery and using chipped material for the walking surface.