

Grass Turf Tyranny by Kathleen Sayce

Ever wonder why we have grass turf for lawns, and spend hours weeding, mowing, and irrigating that turf? It's a cultural habit that was carried across the Atlantic from Europe to the East Coast. In both regions, rain falls pretty evenly all year, including through summer. The habit of closely mown grass turf came west across North America from Europe and the East Coast into a climate that is quite unsuited to it.

Here in the west, our summers are largely dry—and here the green turf paradigm breaks down. Without regular rainfall, and with close mowing, grass plants grow short roots, so short those roots can't reach water deep in the soil. Just as close grazing stresses plants and shortens roots, so does regular close mowing. Either you let the plants die, a strategy I have practiced for years, or you water. And keep on mowing.

Some years ago I took a close look at one part of the lawn that was greener than the rest in mid summer, and realized it was composed of a sedge, not a grass. This green area was carpeted with Sand-dune sedge, a drought tolerant grass relative that grows less than ten inches tall, so needs little mowing, and thrives on no summer water.

These days, my lawn 'turf' includes thrift, low growing daisies, salvia, moss, bulbs, and my goal is a low growing patchwork of grasses, sedges and flowers that I mow, at most, about three times a year. It's wonderfully liberating to set aside the notion that lawns must be composed of grass, and see what thrives here instead.