

SPECIAL  
REPORT

What to do if I lose my lawn?

GO NATIVE  
OR CLOSE TO IT

BY KATHLEEN N. BRENZEL

IT LOOKS VIBRANT, with flowering and fruiting plants, shade trees, and grasses that shimmer like spun gold in sunlight. But this garden, fronting a custom prefab home near downtown Santa Barbara, actually thrives on very little water. "It needed to be super-green to match the house," explains landscape designer Margie Grace, "with a naturalistic feel and the strong sense of place. It needed light and movement."

Before the new landscape went in, piles of sandstone boulders—all unearthed during site preparation for the home—populated the lot. Grace incorporated the boulders into the garden, using them to form gentle mounds and swales that help prevent storm-water runoff, and to build walls. Then she chose mounding shrubs and soft grasses, which are watered by a seasonally adjusted drip-irrigation system. Paths are permeable.

"The secret to any water-smart garden," says Grace, "is playfulness. Play with plant textures and beautiful mulches. And keep the plantings undemanding."

Which these certainly are. "It takes two guys a half-day once a month to tidy the grasses and refresh mulch," says Grace. Most of the plants need irrigating only during August through October. For the other nine months of the year, the irrigation is turned off for everything but the fruit trees.

**DESIGN** Garden: Margie Grace, Santa Barbara; [gracedesignassociates.com](http://gracedesignassociates.com). Home: Michelle Kaufmann, Novato, CA; [michellekaufmann.com](http://michellekaufmann.com).

**S** DIGITAL BONUS 21 inspiring lawn-free yard makeovers: [sunset.com/lawnfree](http://sunset.com/lawnfree).



## Ideas to steal from this garden

## 1 LAWN ALTERNATIVE

Rich green *Myoporum parvifolium* carpets the area closest to the front door. Native to Australia, it grows 3 to 6 inches tall and spreads to 9 feet, but doesn't stand up to foot traffic.

## 2 PERMEABLE PAVING

Stone slabs with Mexican beach pebbles between them create a wide, sinuous path to the front door.

## 3 UNTHIRSTY SHRUBS

Prostrate rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Irene') spills over the low sandstone wall.

Nearby, 'Hidcote' and 'Munstead' English lavender pump out wands of fragrant blooms in late spring.

4 CITRUS Lemon trees (and a small lime tree, nearby) need more water than the other plants; they're on their own irrigation schedule.

5 OPEN SPACES Pockets of the 25- by 80-foot front yard are unplanted, reducing the total area needing water. Grace dressed them with California Gold gravel, then topped them with sandstone boulders.

6 GRASSES Blond Mexican feather grass dances in breezes. Near wild land where it's a weedy nuisance, try similar Slender Veldt Grass (sold as *Pennisetum spathiolatum*)—"the closest I've found to it," says Grace.

7 SHADE TREES Sycamore trees shade the house during the summer months. Native to California where they grow near streams, "they're high-water use but low demand," says Grace. "During drought, they sleep."

## WATER WORDS

**"Californians behave pretty well in droughts. They watch how much watering they're doing. They don't want to stand out in the neighborhood."**

—JOHN A. COLEMAN,  
EAST BAY MUNICIPAL  
UTILITY DISTRICT

SMART-TECH  
WATERING

Don't be afraid of your smart controller.

You want to be good. You want to use less water in your yard. But then you confront your automatic sprinkler system's controller, with its teeny buttons and hieroglyphics, and you feel completely incapable of reprogramming it.

Help is here. It's taken time for controllers to be as user-friendly as smartphones, but it's happening. The best now use Wi-Fi connections or in-ground sensors to limit watering in rainy weather and increase it in heat waves. Some shut down and notify you if the water line breaks. Because they save so much water, many water districts refund their \$90 to \$300 cost too.

One we like is from Rain Bird ([rainbird.com](http://rainbird.com)). Their SST Smart Indoor/Outdoor Sprinkler Timer comes with a self-adjusting weather sensor; you enter your zip code and watering schedule, and the SST adjusts the watering needed according to weather.

Another new controller comes from Kickstarter-funded start-up Roslen Eco-Networking Products ([roslen.com](http://roslen.com)). The netAqua 9D uses your smartphone, tablet, or computer for point-and-click setup, monitoring, and weather-adjusted watering. It can control nine irrigation zones and break watering in short cycles to avoid runoff on slopes. —Jim McCausland