

Want to Remove Your Grass? Here's How I Did It

By Ann Murphy



Our home in Hiddenbrooke had been abandoned for several years before we purchased it via a short-sale in 2013. The front yard was horrible, so I asked a landscape designer to create a xeriscape plan. Once the plan was done, I found a landscaper to bid the cost and it was \$13,000 – way over what I had to spend. So, I put in a few plants and grass.

Over the years, I continued to move towards xeriscape until the sprinklers began to repeatedly leak and I decided that it was the time to take the plunge. I had studied native plants that were full sun, deer resistant and thrived in our climate and felt confident I could select the plants myself.

I went back to the original landscape design for help, modified it myself and re-submitted the plans to HARC. It was approved. I found a landscaper contractor, worked with him daily throughout the project. Occasionally he did things I didn't like and sometimes I had it redone or I lived with it (example: there are too many pathway steps, and they are too close together, but I lived with it; we softened them by adding flowing thyme between steps).

I also attended a City of Vallejo seminar on native gardens and they highly recommended removing your grass by covering it with cardboard and organic soil to form an organic base for the garden – called the Sheet Mulching Technique. This organic technique allows worms and desirable bugs to help your plants while also protecting your garden from the grass growing back. I saved many cardboard boxes in advance, but we still had to purchase more. We used rolls of roofing paper. Once the cardboard/paper is tacked down, then it is covered with water to start the deterioration process, then covered with good soil. "X's" are sliced into the cardboard for the roots of each plant to grow.

Before you start anything, apply to the Solano County Cash for Grass Program (actually called the Water-Efficient Landscape Rebate Program). They offer a rebate of \$1 per square yard grass removal, up to \$1,000 per home (Update: the program now offers \$1.50 per square yard and \$1,500 per home). But they must measure the grass BEFORE you remove the grass and inspect your garden when the work is done. Then they send a check (I received \$701). Sheet mulching is also recommended by the program.

Here are my tips for creating a beautiful garden.

Take Time to Plan

- You can DIY the work yourself, or hire help for part of it, or hire someone to do it all, including getting the design approved by HARC
- Look around your neighborhood and find plants you really like and are thriving.
- Download an app to identify plants you like, snap a photo with the app and create a library (I used PlantSnap)
- Select a color theme if you like (I used purple and gold/yellow, with pops of colors); study the sun and shade of your yard
- Go online for inspiration: Pinterest has designs and plant suggestions; White Flower Farm.com has free design ideas and you can purchase plants for the design (just beware that they are East Coast-based and not all plants are for our region)
- There are also many books available; Sunset has great ones
- I got inspiration from a Marin County landscape designer: Dig Your Garden Landscape Design.com, specifically the Sleepy Hollow/San Anselmo garden
- Be creative and sketch out what you want to see on paper
- Leave existing plants in your garden that you like and do well in your garden; transplant plants from other areas of your garden (I transplanted a Japanese Maple saving over \$300)
- Don't forget about succulents; they have beautiful flowers and make a lovely garden
- Grasses add great interest to your garden as well and come in many colors and sizes.
- Don't go cheap on soil and soil amendments (I used Crown Hill Materials)

Tips

- Don't plant too late in the season; October should be the latest as a freeze will kill your young plants
- Visit local nurseries to see their selection of native plants -
 - MidCity in American Canyon; they offer one- and 5-gallon plants
 - Annie's Annuals in Richmond or online; they sell 4" plants; be sure to know what you want as the nursery can be overwhelming; watch for their sales
 - Sign up to get catalogs before your project: Annie's Annuals and White Flower Farm are two suggestions
 - Lowes and Home Depot have some native plants
 - Hire a landscape designer and/or contractor who can purchase wholesale at Devil Mountain Nursery in San Ramon
- Plant in groups of three or five using one-gallon plants; ten gallon plants will cover the same size as three smaller plants

- Check plant bloom times so that you have new things blooming all the time throughout the spring/summer/fall
- Deadhead and prune to encourage new growth
- Research each plant to know how much water it needs; install drips in appropriate GPM flow (gallons per minute)
- Hiddenbrooke homes don't have pathways to street parking or to front doors; consider a pathway in your garden from the parking cutout
- Consider a riverbed made of stones to add interest
- If you have a hill in your garden, maybe a retaining wall of wood or stones with plants overflowing will look nice and section off garden areas
- If your garden is flat, add soil to create berms (I did this to create interest)
- Be sure to plant tall plants at the foundation of the house and occasionally in the garden for interest; put shorter plants or groundcover closer to the street
- Don't be nervous that the new plants are far apart; they fill in fast (my garden was planted in September and was in full bloom the next spring)
- If large plants overwhelm shorter ones, you can trim them more often or transplant them to bare spots in February or March
- Get a sprinkler control system that also has an app so you can stop and start the watering of your garden or set timers automatically.
- Be prepared that a contractor may say your sprinkler valve system needs updating or is leaking and needs repair since many are over 20 years old.

I am thrilled with my garden and get lots of people walking or stopping by to ask questions. After this first year, I have learned lots about how the garden grows. Some plants are overwhelming others so I will work next spring to thin things out, like Lavandula x intermedia 'Grosso' in my newest garden. Here are the pros and cons to my new garden:

Pros

- Butterflies and bees galore
- Lower water bill (how much? I think I need a year of bills to know for sure)
- Drip systems are very reliable with little breakage verses sprinklers with the grass which leaked and blew off sprinkler heads
- Depending on the plants you select, little maintenance is required
- Save money on a gardener; no 'mow and blow' costs, but some maintenance is required.
- I received \$701 from the county to remove the grass!
- Flowers make me happy! But you don't have to put in flowers; there are many other plants that will make a garden look good

Cons

- Expenses for the things I couldn't do myself, i.e., plants, soil, labor, etc.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions at Annmurphy102@yahoo.com.









