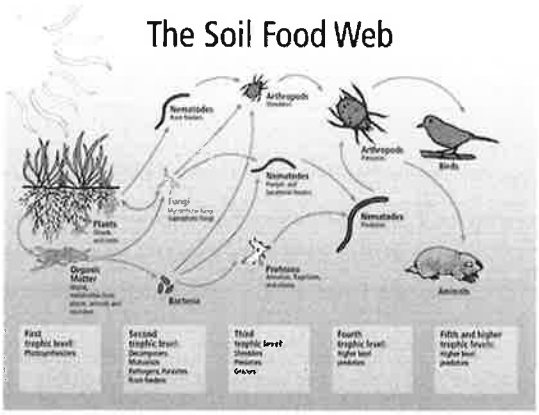
EL PASO COUNTY
MASTER GARDENER
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

HOW TO REMOVE ALL (OR PART) OF YOUR LAWN

You have decided to reduce your need for water by removing some or all of your lawn so that you can replace it with something that is more water-wise. But how do you go about doing that in the most economically and ecologically smart way?

Considerations:



- Maintain soil structure – Good soil structure allows for oxygen and water to get to the roots of your plants.
- Maintain soil microbiology – Some bacteria and fungi in the soil decompose large organic molecules into smaller particles that are more available for plants. Some can increase the moisture holding capacity and the heat tolerance of the plants. (Click USDA – Soil Food Web diagram for more information about the importance of the soil microbiome.)
- Protect above-ground insects & wildlife (and human health) – Some people are concerned about the impact of herbicides on bees and other pollinators as well as the reports about cancer-causing ingredients. (Click here to read more from Yale's e360 about the impacts of herbicides on honeybees. Click here for a recent paper from Tufts University on diverging conclusions about the safety of glyphosate-based herbicides: "scientific conclusions are all over the map.")
- Ease of use – Is heavy machinery involved? Are you physically capable of using it? Do you have to rent it?
- Expense
- Length of time to remove turf

What are the options for removing turfgrass?

No method exists that satisfies all considerations listed above.

Spray with a non-selective herbicide, e.g., Glyphosate – This method is a relatively fast, cheap and easy way to kill your lawn. It maintains the soil's structure and microbiology and leaves the organic content (dead grass and roots) in place to decompose. Because you are not disturbing the soil, weed seeds are not brought to the surface to germinate. You may need to apply the herbicide 2-3 times, 2-3 weeks apart. See the articles linked about to decide if you are comfortable with the health and ecological (possible) risks. READ AND FOLLOW THE LABEL INSTRUCTIONS for safe application.

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Stress the lawn & plant native shrubs – Mow the lawn very short and stop watering your lawn to drought-stress it. Plant native shrubs close enough together so that the mature size will create a continuous cover of shrubs. Water only the shrubs (not your lawn). As they grow bigger, they will provide shade to inhibit lawn growth underneath as well as provide food and shelter for birds and other wildlife. Some excellent, large, drought-tolerant native shrubs that will provide ecological value and winter interest are Three-leaf sumac (*Rhus trilobata),* Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa),* Pawnee Buttes Sand Cherry (*Prunus besseyi),* and Rabbit brush (*Ericameria nauseosa*).

Rhus trilobata - Photo by Irene Shonle

Prunus besseyi - Photo by Plant Select

Fallugia paradoza – photo by Irene Shonle

Ericameria nauseosa – Photo by Utah State University Extension

Where do I start?

The amount of labor required to remove your lawn may be overwhelming, but don't let that deter you. You do not have to do it all at once. Begin with the odd areas that are difficult to mow, such as slopes, tight corners and small patches between sidewalks or driveways. Sections of your lawn that always seem to be in poor condition are prime candidates for removal. You may also want to start with the edges of your property and work in from there, creating beautiful low-water gardens that replace thirsty bluegrass lawns.

Wherever you decide to begin and whatever method you choose, you will be helping the environment, the water supply, and your pocketbook.