Your Yard

Living Landscapes Matter: Lawns And Gardens Are Ecosystems That Help Us All

(NAPSA)—While in some parts of our country, people are replacing their lawns with rocks, mulch, cacti and plastic grass—deadening the landscape in order to conserve water—you may not have to.

"Having a lawn and being a good environment steward are not mutually exclusive," explains Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI). "Grass is a vital part of our living landscapes that contribute to our communities, our families and our health."

Lawns provide a safe place for families to gather and for children and pets to play. But grass is also brilliant at combating many environmental challenges. For example, a good lawn:

•**Filters and Captures Runoff.** When it rains, water "sheets off" hard surfaces, such as hardscapes, parking lots, driveways and roads, turning rainwater into fast-moving, storm water runoff. Grass, however, slows down and absorbs runoff, while also cleansing water of impurities and dust. The grass filtration system is so effective that rainwater filtered through a healthy lawn is often as much as 10 times less acidic than water running off a hard surface.

•**Reduces Heat.** Lawns can be outdoor air conditioners. Turfgrass dissipates the heat island effect caused from asphalt, concrete and other hardscapes. Remarkably, studies have shown that lawns can be 31 degrees cooler than asphalt and 20 degrees cooler than bare soil. That means lower energy bills for you and a nicer environment for everyone.

•**Improves Air Quality.** Grass also plays a vital role in capturing dust, smoke particles and other pollutants. Without grass, these pollutants will remain in the air, resulting in more "code red" air quality days.

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•**Absorbs Carbon Dioxide.** The lawn is the largest carbon sink in the United States. Carbon sinks are natural systems that suck up and store greenhouse gas carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The dense canopy and fibrous root system in a lawn sequesters carbon so well that it outweighs the carbon used for maintaining the lawn by as much as sevenfold.

•**Generates Oxygen.** Lawns are incredible oxygen producers. A turf area 50' x 50' produces enough oxygen to meet the daily needs of a family of four.

•**Supports Biodiversity.** Grass, trees, shrubs and other plants provide food and habitat for birds and small mammals. Insects, spiders and worms live among the grass blades and below the surface in the turf, so your lawn can support biodiversity and wildlife.

•**Controls Soil Erosion.** Turfgrass controls erosion through its natural, dense and fibrous root system. Without grass, soil erodes into streams and lakes, muddying the waters and limiting how sunlight penetrates the water. The nutrients and chemicals carried with soil can cause algae blooms, which steal oxygen from the water and kill fish.

Lawn or No Lawn Is Not the Question

So how to maintain a living landscape—even under tough conditions like a drought?

First, choose the right turfgrass for the climate zone and lifestyle. Hundreds of varieties of turfgrass exist, and some of them—such as buffalo and Bermuda grass—are excellent for drought conditions. When established, these grasses require very little water and are hardy enough to survive foot traffic, children's play and pets.

Secondly, know that too much water is actually bad for grass. Overwatering causes the grass roots to grow horizontally, rather than vertically. With less water, the grass has to work harder and will grow its roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture. This helps it do a better job of trapping carbon and releasing oxygen.

People also need to change the perception that lawns must remain green. It's okay to let your grass go brown. Grass will grow in cycles, "turning on and off," based on the resources it gets. As water becomes less available in an area, grass will slow down, go dormant and turn brown. Turfgrass is resilient. It will green up again when the rains return.

Lastly, incorporate native plants with adaptive plants and grasses suitable for the climate. Add pollinator plants that provide food and habitat for bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and other animals and insects.

For more information, go to www.opei.org/stewardship.