

Op-Ed Don't gravelscape L.A.

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People are starting to panic about their lawns. The Metropolitan Water District is adding \$350 million to its lawn removal rebate program and homeowners are scrambling to rip out grass and replace it with something easy and oh-so drought tolerant — gravel or artificial turf. At least one lawn removal contractor promises to do it for free (the company cashes in the rebate).

Drought panic and rebates incentivize too many quick and dirty solutions for our water crisis. All over the city — and especially in park-poor areas, where postage-stamp lawns may be the only relief from pavement — we have to think before we act. Will exchanging a living, breathing yard for a bleak gravelscape save water? Some. But is it the only way? Is it the right way?

Before you call the gravel truck, here are a few things to consider.

Hold on to water

Los Angeles was designed to shed water. As early as the 1920s, we started engineering our landscape to take rainwater to the ocean as quickly as possible, so it wouldn't cause flooding. That means rain washes off rooftops and pavement, into gutters and storm drains, and then into concrete-lined rivers and out to sea. Because we've paved so much of the landscape, our aquifers don't recharge when it rains — the water can't sink in.

That has to change. Almost 90% of our water is imported from unreliable sources, and state and local authorities are mandating a decrease in imported water of as much as 50% by 2024. As we prepare to rely on local water, we need to refill our aquifers.

The best way to do it is with a planted landscape. Gravel is permeable, and OK in small doses, but it doesn't absorb and hold water as trees and plants do. And just tearing up grass and laying on gravel does nothing to keep water on a site. Reshaping and planting the land to hold and infiltrate water can increase our water supply.

Rebate better

The water supply itself needs reshaping too. Rainwater harvesting, gray water reuse and recycling water from sewage treatment plants can drastically reduce or eliminate our need to water the landscape with potable water. Laws and policy have to change to ease reuse, and water agencies and cities have to educate and even reward the public for doing so. Incentivizing turf removal and not reuse is shortsighted.

Water smarter

Our lawns and gardens are often overwatered by two to three times what they need. Turfgrass companies recommend watering lawns with only 1 inch of water once a week. (Put out a can to measure how much you're watering.) Overwatering (or fertilizing) native plants kills them.

Establishing plants, trees and yes, even turf, with less frequent, deep waterings will develop deep roots and a landscape that withstands long periods of drought. If everyone watered only as much as needed, we could make a big dent in water use.

Conserve the ecosystem, not just water

Living landscapes aren't just about aesthetics; they are beneficial in multiple ways. Birds, bees and insects (pollinators all) need what trees and plants provide. Humans do too.

Gardens and lawns act as air conditioning for L.A., which is only getting hotter with climate change. Plants and trees provide shade and transpire moisture to cool the air; gravel and artificial turf don't. In fact, they create the opposite of a virtuous cycle: Fewer plants means more heat, and more heat means faster evaporation from watering, swimming pools and vegetation. More heat also means more water to support the same landscape.

Replacing lawn with plastic grass in particular can block oxygen from entering the soil and tree roots; it may suffocate what trees and plants are left after turf removal. We can't afford that; we need to protect and add trees and plants that shelter pollinators, hold water, absorb CO₂ and cool us down.

Make the right change

Los Angeles would no doubt be better off with less turf. But not if we replace

it with gravel or plastic. Almost anything grows in L.A. if you just add water. But so much will grow even if you don't.

A shady garden filled with flowers and trees native to Southern California, or populated with plants from southwest Australia, South Africa's cape and the lands around the Mediterranean Sea needs little to no water in the summer — maybe once a month.

Your landscape can also borrow from L.A.'s past, when majestic California oaks offered oases of shade on golden grassy summer hillsides; lupines, poppies, sages and buckwheat punctuated spring and fall with bursts of purples, oranges, pinks and rusty reds; and ribbons of willows and sycamore shaded roses, rushes and grasses along creek beds and riverbanks. These plants survive long summer dry spells with deep roots that hold soil in place during winter rains. And they're beautiful.

The drought is sparking long-needed action toward water independence. Los Angeles can be a city of landscapes that collect rain, give shade and provide food for the pollinators that help feed us. If you have acres of green grass or grass you don't use, a new design is a good idea. If you have a tiny or well-used yard, make smaller adjustments and water with care. Educate yourself. By all means take advantage of rebates, but don't fall victim to dead landscapes that aren't worth the money or the water saved in the long run.

Los Angeles can build a framework of deep roots and deep understanding of the multiple benefits of ecological design. Despite its reputation for superficiality, the city can shed its thin skin, do a little reshaping and root-strengthening and capture and conserve water. Even “shallow” L.A. can become known for a beauty that goes beyond skin deep.

Mia Lehrer, Claire Latané and Margot Jacobs design and advocate for multiple-benefit landscapes, including schoolyards, urban parks and forests, and projects along the Los Angeles River.

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