How to Have a Lawn Without a Lawn
By Nicole Woodling Douglas

Take a class with Nicole through Cabrillo Extension!
Plant Selection & Landscape Design
Saturday, 6/20, 9am-3pm
$20/$25 with Nicole Woodling Douglas

With so many people wanting to conserve water in the landscape, thirsty lawns are usually—and rightfully—the first thing to go. In the landscape industry, we differentiate between “functional” and “non-functional” turf. Functional turf is grass that is actually used, like at a soccer field. Non-functional turf refers to all the rest—the blankets of thirsty green grass that cover most suburban neighborhoods. In truth, turf is quite unsuited to the semi-arid climate in California, requiring enormous amounts of water to remain lush. In Santa Cruz County, upwards of fifty percent of residential water is used in the landscape. With many water districts requiring drought-related cutbacks and raising rates, removing non-functional turf is a great thing to do from both financial and ecological perspectives.

However, many people still want the look or functionality of a “lawn”...a green patch in the middle of the garden or an area for kids and animals to play. Fortunately, there are many less thirsty groundcovers that meet these requirements. My favorite is called *Dymondia* margareta. A South-African native, *Dymondia* is a low-growing, dense groundcover with deep succulent roots. The foliage of *Dymondia* is a beautiful grey-green color, evocative of Mediterranean gardens, and has small yellow daisy-like flowers in the summer. This versatile plant prefers full sun in our coastal microclimate, but will take light shade inland. *Dymondia* can take a fair amount of foot traffic, withstanding kids, dogs, and even moms who do yoga in the garden. Best of all, this tough plant requires about 10% of the water of conventional turf.

Here’s a “before” photo of a recent lawn-removal job in Aptos, CA. My client wanted the turf removed and a turf-like area installed, along with new, colorful drought-tolerant plants throughout the garden.

*Dymondia* is widely available at nurseries and comes in flats which contain many small individual plant plugs. The plugs are planted 6-12” apart and in about 6 months, the plant spreads to form a dense mat. Here’s how it looks when first planted.

*Dymondia* can be watered with micro-spray on a low-pressure drip system. It will need water a few times a week during the establishment period, and infrequently after that. Here you can see the tolerance of *Dymondia* for foot and pet traffic, even when the plants are still relatively small.

There are a few things to keep in mind when growing *Dymondia margaretae*. It doesn’t like to be too hot or too cold and is suited for Sunset zones 15-24. Heavy clay or poorly draining soils are unfavorable for *Dymondia*; as with many plants suitable for Mediterranean climates, good drainage is important for plant health. Gophers will not hesitate to dine on this plant, so the area needs to be correctly lined with stainless steel gopher wire. Here’s the recent work of a gopher where the planting area isn’t lined with gopher wire.

Here’s my client’s finished garden in Aptos with the *Dymondia* “lawn”. The planting beds have been enlarged and made more curvaceous to create a fluid-like look that matches the ocean backdrop.

I chose gorgeous and high-impact Mediterranean plants for the borders, created stunning year-round color, and added food sources for pollinators and nectar feeders. The exterior water use was reduced by more than seventy-five percent, and not least of all, my client received a $1,000 turf-removal rebate from the water district.

I hope that this serves as inspiration on the beauty and water savings that you can achieve by removing your lawn! Please join me at my Plant Selection and Design class on June 20th at Cabrillo Extension to learn more about how to do this at your home.

**Online registration is easy at [www.cabrillo-extension.org](http://www.cabrillo-extension.org) or call 831.479.6331**

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