

Landscaping with less water becoming the norm

By Kate Galbraith, New York Times

AUSTIN – At a botanical research center here, slender-bladed grasses that are soft on bare feet fill a round patch of lawn, which has held up despite getting trampled by hordes of visitors all spring.

This is a demonstration plot showcasing a mix of native grass species, and it is part of researchers' efforts to find a lawn that will require less water, and less mowing than conventional Texas lawns.

“Our perspective was – let’s investigate alternatives,” said Mark Simmons, director of the ecosystem design group at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Lawn management is “counterintuitive,” he said, because it requires too many resources, like water and fertilizer.

The research in Texas, which is financed by the retail giant Wal-Mart Stores, is an effort to address an increasingly pressing problem: How to manage lawns when local water supplies are badly stretched.

Texas is in the throes of a serious drought, as are much of southern Europe, Britain and other parts of the world. And lawns take up vast amounts of water – in the United States, more than half of the water use in some cities goes toward watering the landscape, though this varies considerably, depending on climate and other factors.

Lawn management is “a huge industry,” Mr. Simmons said. “It’s not a sustainable industry as it stands.”

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