

Opinion: Dead lawn isn't so terrible

By Joe Mathews

Forgive me for bragging, but my front lawn looks a lot worse than yours.

As the drought deepens and the state Water Board revises plans for mandatory restrictions, California's lawn culture has flipped, dirt-side up. Your local community pillars, once celebrated for lawns and gardens even greener than their money, run the risk of becoming social outcasts.



Joe Mathews

On the other side of this flip is your columnist, who is allergic to lawn watering and pretty much all other forms of lawn maintenance. Now, at the dawn of this drier California era, I have become an accidental avatar of civic virtue. It used to be that if you didn't keep your lawn a pristine green, you didn't care. Now, you don't care if you do.

"More and more people want to move away from having to spend weekends mowing lawns," Sierra Club California Director Kathryn Phillips told KQED recently, thus heralding my own aversion to lawn care as forward-thinking. She also said: "It's sort of a learning moment for all of us."

And so I hope my own story can teach those who may be

wondering whether life can go on when your green grass starts to turn to dust.

When we bought our home in South Pasadena four years ago, schools for our kids – not lawns – were on our minds. The house itself was, and remains, a mess. But we also inherited a lovely lot with several fruit-giving trees and an unpretentious Bermuda grass front yard served by an automatic sprinkler system.

Then came the shocking water bills – nearly \$200 in some months. We cut back watering to twice a week. We installed low-flow toilets and a washing machine. But the bills stayed high. The problem was that our small city has raised water rates more than 170 percent over the past seven years to fund updates to a long-neglected water infrastructure.

So last year, I stopped watering altogether.

Money was the biggest motivator. Lack of time was another – with three kids and a demanding job, lawn care wasn't a priority. The drought provided a justification for a shut-off. And my own travels through this water-stressed state, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley, reinforced my determination to avoid watering my Southern California lawn.

As a descendant of Okies, I was prepared for the front lawn to go full Dust Bowl. But, on the south side of the lawn, the grass still grows green, protected by shade from a neighbor's trees and a magnolia along the street. But the sunbaked north half is now a mix of yellow grass and dirt. Weeds have a foothold. Relatives and neighbors agree: My lawn looks awful.

At first, I felt guilty. But that didn't last. Two people on the block sold homes for high prices, so I wasn't hurting property values. And my bills have come down to about \$70 a month.

Now, with the full force of the state Water Resources Control

Board and Gov. Jerry Brown's mandatory 25 percent reduction behind me, I feel pride when I look outside my front door. When the state disclosed that my city was using too much water and would be required to cut down by 35 percent, my pride swelled. Some of us need an intervention, but not in my household.

Yes, I can hear the horrified screams of the gardeners and homeowners associations and the good neighbors across our state: Not watering is not an answer! You can't just let your lawn become an eyesore! I know. I know. The change in lawn culture will require more from me.

But what exactly is required? After months of investigating the possibilities, I'm uncertain.

Many water agencies will pay Californians to take out their turf and replace it with drought-resistant landscaping, which sounds good. Except that the reimbursement rates cover only a fraction of the cost. If you do what's most responsible and aesthetically pleasing, it could run \$20,000 for even a smaller lawn. Cheaper options typically replace grass with unsightly plantings that annoy neighbors and hard surfaces that add to the "heat island" effect of cities. And then some experts argue that the right kind of grass, maintained with little watering, is environmentally better than some drought-resistant landscaping.

Reading the contradictory advice, you can see that the arguments during this shift in lawn culture will be as much about ideals of beauty as about water. That's fine, but for the legions of us who don't care about looks, the water worthies need to get their stories straight and give clear guidance. How do I — cheaply — keep the front of my house presentable and water-wise?

If no answer is forthcoming, I'm perfectly happy to keep the water off. Let others bemoan the eyesore I've created. I'll be

celebrating my civic-mindedness.

Joe Mathews wrote this Connecting California column for Thinking L.A., a project of UCLA and Zócalo Public Square.