

My seasonal Lawn, or, How to Address Some of the Biggest Problems we Face Living in the Mountains

By Jim Bliss

Living in the mountains creates some interesting problems. Two of the biggest are fire and frost. If you combine these two with the limited water we have available in California, it paints a pretty grim picture. The question for me as a gardener and homeowner is what steps I can take to help make life more sustainable for all of us who have grown to love the life we have here in our mountain communities. We have all seen articles on clearing around our property to protect ourselves from the wildfires that have become so prevalent in the last few years. And the government is constantly passing new water restrictions. But what can I do personally to make a difference?

The first thing we need to do is to educate ourselves, because fire, homes and water are all interconnected. Our homes are the biggest investment most of us will ever make and a wildfire will destroy it in moments. Water will put out fires, but that, too, can be in short supply. In our small water district, they never take down the signs asking us to conserve water. And, expecting the water district to have the resources to handle a big fire is unrealistic. A house fire they can handle, but if we have not cleared around our property then you can expect a fire to spread and spread fast.

So, we call the fire department, and a fire truck shows up. Did you know that most of these trucks only carry 750 gallons of water? That is about eight to ten minutes of use. We can only hope it is a small fire. So, I put in a 5000-gallon rainwater tank to save water for my irrigation needs. I also make sure there are at least 2000 gallons in my tank during fire season. Admittedly that only gives the fire truck an extra 20 minutes of pumping time, but it could save my house.

This finally brings me to my seasonal lawn. Green lawns take 40 to 60 percent of the landscape water in California. At the most, this is five percent of the total water use in the state. You might just say, "why bother?" but personally, I would rather have a carrot than a lawn in the summer.

Though you might not think so, I do take care of my seasonal lawn. I plant tall fescue in the fall which crowds out a lot of weed seeds. Then, I spread the overflow from my tank in the winter all over the property to help save water in the soil itself. We also mow our yard regularly in the winter. First, we spread a layer of dry fall leaves over the grass and then mow the leaves and grass together. This mixes them well and makes a fast-hot compost mix which we use all over the garden. Because it is a seasonal grass there are almost no weed seeds and it is pretty high quality.

But, as you might expect, by sometime in June the lawn has turned brown (except over the septic system). We cut it really close and add the dry grass to the compost heap as well.

I am still dealing with brown or bare spots like everyone else who has lawn. And, when it turns brown in the summer, I miss it a little but I feel like I am doing something to deal with the water and fire issues we all face in California, however small my contribution might be. Just remember that though it is just a drop in the bucket, if enough of us plan for the long hot summer there will be more water to fight fires and grow carrots as well.

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If you have any questions that are garden related call the University of California Master Gardeners hotline at (209) 533-5912 in Tuolumne County, 209-754-2880 in Calaveras County or email us at mgtuolumne@ucdavis.edu. From rainwater tanks to drought resistant plants we can help you find an answer. *Check out our UCCE Master Gardener webpage (https://ucanr.edu/sites/MG_of_CS/). You can find us on Facebook, and on the radio at kaadlp.org or 103.5 FM on Motherlode Community Radio.*