

The (native) grass is always greener

In all my years of writing a column for *Digger*, I have never had as much feedback from readers as I did for my February column, “Keeping the garden green,” wherein I expressed concern for the high cost of my water bill.

The rising cost of water was in the news again this past April, when the Portland Water Bureau proposed yet another rate hike of 5.9 percent, due to take effect in July — right before the height of summer water usage! Portland Mayor Charlie Hales dialed back the increase to 4.1 percent, but still, Portlandians should expect to pay even more for water soon.

I also discussed the trend of municipalities encouraging homeowners to remove their lawns and plant native plants.

First of all, as I mentioned in the article, “native plant” is vague, and while sounding politically correct, it is very confusing to homeowners. Plants did not draw the state boundaries, nor do these boundaries line up with climate zones, let alone microclimates.

Diane Elder and her husband operated a small greenhouse business for several years in the high desert of eastern Oregon. She recounted the time when she presented a class to a Master Gardener group. One newcomer stated that we should plant only native plants in our yards and we would have no problems. This led to a very long conversation.

Diane said, “Native here is greasewood, sagebrush, various grains and lots of alkali dust!”

What I'm Hearing

Mike Darcy



“What is native?” wrote Chris Totten, vice president of sales and marketing at EB Stone & Son Inc., a maker of fertilizers, soil blends and amendments. “Native to what microclimate and bioregion of the Pacific Northwest? Or California? And why should we ignore an entire palette of plants that may be completely compatible with the annual rainfall patterns of a particular region but which may come from an entirely different region of the world?”

Jan Main, of Jan Main Design, Garden Design and Consultation, wrote, “I often feel I need to look over my shoulder when I say anything against planting all native plants. There are just so many native plants that are not suitable to the average urban/suburban landscape.”

As I mentioned in my column, I am not against using native plants in our landscapes. I have native plants in my garden. However, I think we need to be careful when we use the term “native plants.” We should remember that gardeners using a mix of native and non-native plants are in most cases good stewards of the earth.

My column mentioned another countermeasure to large water bills: “Take out your lawn and plant native plants.” It is a statement I have often heard. Considering that Oregon is a major grass producing state, I thought it would be interesting to meet with a representative of the grass seed industry and a turfgrass specialist from Oregon State University (OSU) to get their thoughts on this issue.

Roger Beyer, executive director of the Oregon Seed Council, is very proud that Oregon ranks first among grass seed producing states. Oregon also supplies 60 percent of the world's supply of cool season grasses. The grass seed industry brings in approximately \$400 million to our state annually and employs about 10,000 people. Ninety percent of the grass from our state is grown in the Willamette Valley.

Alec Kowalewski, a turfgrass specialist at OSU who holds a doctorate in crop and soil science, said that healthy lawns are a natural product, and there are many benefits to having them. A lawn can cool the landscape 7–10 degrees when compared to atmospheric temperature; in addition, it provides a natural water filtration system, helps prevent water runoff, and provides oxygen. When it comes to carbon sequestration (the storage of carbon dioxide or other forms of carbon to either mitigate or defer global warming and avoid dangerous climate change), grass is the best soil carbon sequestering plant, with trees being the best aboveground carbon sequestering plants. ▶

Turf lawns such as those grown at Oregon Tree and Turf in Hubbard, Ore. (pictured), have many environmental benefits, according to turfgrass specialist Alex Kowalewski at Oregon State University. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP



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▲ WHAT I'M HEARING

Walking across campus, Kowalewski sees many positives to a natural grass lawn. As he observes students playing, sitting, laying and relaxing on the grass, he imagines how different this picture would be if it were bark dust or compost. A natural lawn provides function, recreation and aesthetic values.

I told him that I thought many homeowners believe (as I did) that artificial turf is fairly maintenance free and lasts forever. Here is some very interesting information that he provided. For an athletic field, an average cost for artificial turf is \$13,000–39,000 per year. For a natural grass field, the cost is \$15,000–49,000 per year.

Artificial turf does not last forever. The average life span for an athletic field is 10 years, then it needs to be removed and disposed of, most likely in a landfill. There is also some concern that MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) may live on the surface of artificial turf, whereas on a natural lawn there are organisms that break it down.

Contrary to popular belief, artificial turf does need water on a regular basis to clean the surface and provide cooling. This can require almost as much water as a natural lawn. In the summer, heat can be a factor because the surface of artificial turf can be 7–10 degrees higher than natural grass would be.

Christine Ellis, of Gregg and Ellis Landscape Designs, said that many clients have a good feeling about the term “native plants” but no idea what it really means. “A lawn is one of the easiest plants to grow sustainably,” she said. “It’s the mower maniac who needs to be torn out and replaced.”

So, if we are looking for native plants, it turns out that grass is one of the most prolific native plants in Oregon. Rye, tall and fine fescue, and bent grasses are native to the Willamette Valley. ☺

Mike Darcy is the host of “In the Garden with Mike Darcy,” a radio program airing at 9 a.m. Saturdays on KXL 101 FM in Portland. He can be reached at itgmikedarcy@comcast.net.

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