

The ground floor - alternatives

Lawns are lovely to look at and they provide space for play and entertaining, but they also need a lot of water and maintenance. So, when planning your garden, think about how much lawn you actually require, and place it only where you really need it. For best visual effects, use lawn near the house, and, more practically, in areas where you plan to play sports. Then consider alternative floor coverings (Fig 1). These include a wide range of materials, such as permeable paving, pebbles and gravel. Alternatively, you may prefer a living carpet of Water Wise, low-growing, ground covering plants.



Fig 1. Alternative floor coverings can be colourful.

Water Wise lawn care

Once you have decided on your lawn area, take into account the following:

- Plan a simple shape.
- Make your lawn circular or oval rather than curvy.
- Avoid using lawn on steep slopes, next to fences and for narrow walkways as these are difficult areas to maintain.
- Avoid having trees in the lawn area.
- Plan to harvest water to water your lawn area.
- Before laying the lawn, shape the area to have a slight hollow in the middle in order to hold rain water on the lawn.
- Choose the right grass. In the winter rainfall and Western Cape region, choose buffalo grass. In summer rainfall areas, choose kikuyu or indigenous *Cynodon* species.
- Water efficiently i.e. not more than necessary and not between 10:00 and 14:00.
- To encourage deep rooting, irrigate lawns deeply and infrequently. In mild climates, once a week should be adequate. In hotter climates, you may need to water more often. Water less in cool months. Remember that lawn is a high water-use plant and should only take up 10-20% of your garden area.
- Fertilise regularly but lightly. Lawns are heavy feeders and require regular applications of high-nitrogen fertilisers such as 3:2:1. Apply 10 g per square metre

monthly from September to March and water well. If you cut back on watering because of drought, hold back on fertilising too.

- Mow often. Grass is weakened if it grows too long between mowing. Set mowers to cut at these heights: kikuyu – 4-6 cm; fine grasses (*Cynodon spp.*) - 3-4 cm; cool season evergreen grasses (Shade Over/All Seasons) – 5-7 cm.
- Scarify late. To conserve water in summer rainfall regions scarify, top dress and fertilise the lawn only at the very end of the dry winter season as it will need watering from then onwards.
- Allow lawns to go dormant in winter.

Just because lawn and turf areas are high-water use does not mean that grass cannot be used in landscape design. Lawn area is a great play space for children and pets. There are eight rules for Water Wise landscaping design. One of these rules suggests that if there is a need for turf or lawn areas, that these areas are designed for a manageable size and shape with the appropriate grass type.

There are a number of low-water use ground covers available, which can be used in place of grass. For example, vygies, hen-and-chicken, bulbine (Fig 2), trailing gazania and star jasmine are ground covers that, once established, do not need water except for during very hot, dry spells.



Fig 2. Bulbines can be used as a low-water use ground cover in place of lawn.

Permeable surfaces are surfaces that allow water to penetrate into the ground below. This water is often cleaner and less polluted than stormwater that has flown over impermeable surfaces. Examples of permeable surfaces that can be used in place of lawn are pine bark nuggets, gravel and small pebbles, spaced flagstones and permeable concrete pavers.