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## **Home Turf: Faux Grass Delivers the Green Without the Fuss**

*Homeowners are shelling out thousands of dollars for artificial landscaping, but fake plants and synthetic turf can save big on water and upkeep in the long run*

*By Alina Dizik*

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For nearly \$100,000, Matthew and Nina Christensen got exactly the landscaping they wanted. The 2,029-square-foot area around their home in Newport Beach, Calif., has several shades of green, gentle slopes and altering lengths of bluntly cut grass that make it look freshly mowed no matter the season.

“Our neighbors on both sides are in contact with our landscaper,” says Mr. Christensen, 39 years old, a commercial real-estate developer.

If it sounds too good to be true, it is. The greenery is almost all artificial. The Christensens’ landscaping includes about \$23,000 worth of faux elements, including synthetic grass around the pool, on a putting green, along a dog run and covering the home’s second-floor terrace.

“We now have a lively, energetic green surface that’s much more welcoming,” adds Mr. Christensen. The 5,500-square-foot, five-bedroom, seven-bathroom home was designed by architect Christopher Brandon, of Brandon Architects in Costa Mesa, who also planned the outdoor space.

Mr. Brandon says about 75% of the projects he does for modern-style homes have faux grass. Homeowners like it because there is almost no maintenance, it doesn’t need water, it always looks tidy and it can be used in areas where real grass won’t grow. It gives properties a clean, high-end feel. He also prefers artificial turf that has brown tinges and different lengths to create realistic imperfections. “When everything is perfectly the same length, it ends up looking like a carpet,” Mr. Brandon adds.



In Napa Valley, Hillary Ryan and her husband spent \$60,000 for their perfect synthetic lawn, a 3,600-square-foot parcel surrounding their five-bedroom home. Her favorite part is that there is no dirt to track into the house.

“Grass is messy,” says the 42-year-old real-estate agent.

When building what she calls her rural rock 'n' roll-style home in 2016, Ms. Ryan and her husband, Andy, 53, founder of a wine-bottling company, wanted turf that could thrive in drought-prone California. Both had lawns at their homes before they were married and were conscious of how much water they used. They also wanted a field that could withstand beatings from the sports activities of their blended family of four school-age sons. They paired the faux turf with drought-tolerant native plants throughout the exterior, spending a total of \$200,000 for landscaping.

“We really had the goal of not having a full-time gardener and we accomplished that,” says Ms. Ryan.

Although natural grass is priced at less than \$2 a square foot for initial landscaping, it requires mowing, maintenance, and watering that add thousands to the total cost, says Tommy Beadel, co-founder at Thomas James Homes, an Aliso Viejo, Calif.-based custom-homes builder that installs synthetic and natural turf.

By comparison, high-end synthetic grass can cost \$11 to \$19 a square foot, but can pay for itself in saved expenses. Maintenance includes just cleaning up occasional weed growth and caring for heavy trafficked areas that may flatten out overtime.

As little as five years ago, such faux-is-best thinking was nonexistent among luxury homeowners, and their landscape designers. The turf eventually faded into a blue-tinged green. The faux products sold to homeowners were the same ones used on sports fields, he adds.

“Even the mention of the word fake sent peoples toes curling,” says Grahame Hubbard, a New York-based landscape designer specializing in terraces and rooftops.

These days, however, Mr. Hubbard uses photos of his own work via Instagram with hashtags like #syntheticlawn to sell potential clients on low-maintenance options, which include turf and boxwood hedges that he puts up for privacy.

Today's synthetic products—a combination of nylon, polyethylene and polypropylene—are made specifically for the home and have better drainage, stay cooler in the sun and remain in good condition for years. The material is woven into a permeable backing that are better bonded, stitched and seamed. Longer blades feel softer, and multiple blades woven together have a more grasslike feel underfoot. They often include thatch, a material to mimic dried grass. Also, pigment variation mimics natural grass.

When a natural lawn in her Brooklyn townhouse didn't get enough sunlight, Alexa Suskin, 36, sought another option. She and her husband, Marc Suskin, worked with a landscape designer to complete a backyard garden and patio in 2016, using natural plants on the perimeter of a faux lawn. The project cost \$50,000, including \$8,000 for the artificial turf.



Passersby can't tell real from synthetic, and several neighbors have followed suit. "It looks real and I'm less likely to step on a bee," says Ms. Suskin.

James Stephenson, who worked with Ms. Suskin and another neighbor, says clients often choose artificial turf when they have small children they want to keep out of dirt and away from bugs, or to use under lawn furniture to keep the area from getting torn up.

More are giving up the fight against faux. After voting against using turf on a real-estate association board a few years ago, Palm Beach, Fla., landscape architect Keith Williams says it is now a staple in his work, including at his own home, with projects ranging from \$300,000 to \$1 million for new homes.

He is especially quick to recommend faux turf between stone or pavers or for a driveway, for a look that is lush without the necessary upkeep. "It's been a slow transition, but I love it now," he says.

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