Springing Forward in our (Very) Dry State

By Christopher Rose, Executive Director

By the time you read this, we’ll have almost one month of spring under our belts. We’ll also have lived through the driest winter on record, and be well into our third year of drought. Though we’ve had a little rain here and there, everyone who manages water in any capacity in the state is putting plans in place to try and deal with a record shortfall. Here at the RCD, staff and volunteers are putting the last of our plants in the ground for the season, establishing water-efficient irrigation systems, attacking weeds and getting ready for a long dry summer.

District staff have been rethinking the ways we plan and establish plants in restoration projects when there is no expectation of impending rain or confidence in future rain events. It reminds us that we live in a naturally dry state. If we’re going to have enough water, both this year and in the future, all of us need to rethink what we spend our limited water budget on, and why. Saving water is urgently important. We need to build and protect a healthy reserve to see us through in tough years, and one way to do that with water is to rethink the way we live to use less all the time.

SRCD has supported gardening with drought tolerant California natives and naturalized hybrids for a long time. One of the best ways to achieve big water savings is to convert lawn areas- which can use more water than all other home uses combined- into drought tolerant plantings featuring native grass meadows or native shrubs. The Solano County Water Agency offers a one-time rebate to customers who replace their turf with drought tolerant meadows, mulched drought-tolerant shrubs or permeable hardscape, and RCD staff can help you plan for the switch.

Plants native to Solano County and similar areas evolved to survive in drought conditions, and require much less water to flourish than species evolved to live in wetter climates. A garden planted with a variety of native plants provides habitat and nectar sources throughout the year to support local and migratory beneficial insects, birds and wildlife. In urban areas, native gardens provide wildlife habitat and cover where none would otherwise exist.

What a perfect time for our Spring Plant Sale! As always, the plant sale features drought tolerant California native plants and other regionally appropriate drought tolerant species. Set for May 3rd this year, the event will feature over twenty species of reasonably priced plants for your garden, fenceline or back forty. SRCD staff and Board members and volunteers from the Solano County Master Gardeners will be on hand to assist you in picking the appropriate plants for your specific needs and site conditions. Solano RCD staff will give a presentation and answer questions about drought tolerant gardening with California natives from 10:00 to 11:00 am. Staff from the Solano County Water Agency will also be present to answer question about their turf replacement rebate program. We look forward to seeing you there!
The recipe to success in saving water, controlling weeds and benefitting wildlife in your low maintenance shrub garden includes several main ingredients:

- Drip irrigation
- Mulch over the unvegetated areas
- A variety of shrubs that flower at staggered times of year and are easy to maintain

Choosing your plants is the fun part! Here are some of our top recommendations for Solano County gardens (in no particular order):

1. **Deer grass** (*Muhlenbergia rigens*) – large bunch grass, provides cover and seed for wildlife, Central Valley native.
2. **Foothill penstemon** (*Penstemon heterophyllus*) – beautiful purple-blue flowers attract bees and hummingbirds, Solano County native (foothills).
3. **CA fuchsia** (*Epilobium canum*) – late summer flowers attract hummingbirds, can take some shade, Solano County native (foothills).
4. **Yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*) – flowers attract butterflies all summer long, good ground cover, can take some shade, Solano County native.
5. **CA lilac** (*Ceanothus spp.*) – beautiful spring flowers that are true-blue, attracts bees and butterflies, Solano County native (foothills).
6. **Coral bells** (*Heuchera spp.*) – delicate spring flowers, takes substantial shade, Solano County native.
7. **Western redbud** (*Cercis occidentalis*) – lovely small tree with striking purple flowers in early spring, important food source for hummingbirds, Solano County native (foothills).
9. **Matilija poppy** (*Romneya coulteri*) – large showy flowers, good tall ground cover for very dry slopes, Southern CA native.
10. **Pacific Coast Hybrid Iris** (*Iris douglasiana hybrids*) – diversity of colors available, beautiful spring flowers on perennial bulbs, good ground cover. Bred from CA native iris.
So… you want to replace your water-hungry lawn, but you don’t want to convert it to mulch and shrubs? Perhaps you have pets that like to lie on your lawn, or perhaps you just like the look of grass… Luckily it’s easy to use native grasses and sedges to create a meadow that provides the look of a lawn but needs very little water once established. You can even tuck in bulbs and wildflowers to fill your new meadow with flowers!

Selecting your species

After you get rid of your existing lawn (see the article on page 6), the next step is to select your native grass or sedge. The table on the next page will help guide you to the right species for your situation. This table was compiled from a variety of resources, including the book “Know Your Natives”, produced by Yolo RCD.

Summer water?

If you are OK with watering at least 2-3 times a month during the summer, you can select any species from the table. Even those that normally go dormant in the summer under natural conditions will stay green with some water. However, if you don’t want to water at all in the summer, select species from the bottom half of the table. They will turn brown during hot weather if not watered, but will green up after the first rain.

Growth form (3rd column in the table) If you want a solid, continuous mass of grass, pick a rhizomatous species, which grows by forming a dense mass of grass stems. If you like a “bunchier” look, with room for bulbs or wildflowers, select a bunchgrass.

Awns (4th column) Some native grasses have seed heads with sharp, needle-like awns. If dogs with long, fluffy hair have access to your meadow, you may want to consider picking a species with short awns. Another option is to mow or cut off the seed heads before they develop awns.

Height (5th column) Most native grasses and sedges naturally grow to a height that is taller than a typical sod lawn. The table gives height ranges, which can vary depending upon soil type, sunlight, and nutrients. Although some species can be mowed (11th column), there are limits as to how much you can reduce the height of some grasses without damaging them. The heights given for bunchgrasses include their flower stalks. These can easily be trimmed off without hurting the bunchgrass.

Growth season (6th column) Warm season grasses grow actively in the summer (but need water to do that), while cool season grasses grow naturally in the winter (with the rain). Cool season grasses are usually dormant in the summer, but can be tricked into staying green with occasional irrigation. A couple of the warm season species are winter dormant and will turn brown in cold weather.

Water, Exposure, Soil (7th, 8th and 9th columns) Different species prefer different amounts of water and sun. Some do better in sandy soils while others can tolerate the heavy clay soils so common in Solano County. Make sure you match up the conditions at your site with the requirements of the species you are thinking of using.

Planting (10th column) Many native grasses can be grown from seed, but most sedges and a few grasses have to be planted as small plug plants (more on that later).

Installing your meadow

Where to buy your natives? There are a number of nurseries in the area that sell native grasses and sedges; try searching for “native grass supplier northern California” on your web browser. Here at Solano RCD, we often buy our grass seed and plugs from Hedgerow Farms in Winters.

Native meadows, like this one made of slender sedge (Carex praegracilis), can be very pet-friendly. Photo by Mick Klasson
Timing The best time to install your meadow is in February or March, before it gets too hot. Make sure the soil is NOT saturated when you are doing heavy work to protect soil structure and prevent compaction.

Planting from seed, you will need to rototill. Use a rake to break up large clumps of soil and create a finely-textured seed bed. Use a broadcast seeder to spread seed evenly: your target is 50-75 seeds per square foot or ¾ pound per 1,000 square feet. You should count the number of seeds in a square foot to make sure you are seeding at the correct rate. Then, lightly rake seeds into soil - this improves soil-seed contact and hides the seed from birds.

Planting from plugs, you will need to purchase grasses or sedges in special trays that have small plants growing in 1”x 1”x 4” cells. Plugs are best planted with a dibble stick (see picture), which you can buy on-line or make yourself with an old broom stick or even a construction stake. Use your dibble to create a small hole slightly deeper than the depth of the plug root mass. Then jam the plug into the bottom of the hole, so that the surface of the plug is about ½ inch below the surface of the soil. Finally

Species of native grasses and sedges appropriate for Solano County low-water meadows

Needs some amount of summer water

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara sedge</td>
<td>Riverbanks and seasonal sloughs</td>
<td>Rhizomatous - forms a dense mass of stems</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12-24 inches</td>
<td>Active growth in summer, green year round</td>
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<td>Carex barbara</td>
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<td>Sand dune sedge</td>
<td>Coastal sand dunes</td>
<td>Rhizomatous - forms a dense mass of stems</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>8-12 inches</td>
<td>Green year round with watering</td>
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<td>Carex pansa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slender sedge</td>
<td>Floodplains and wet meadows</td>
<td>Rhizomatous - forms a dense mass of stems</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>8-18 inches</td>
<td>Warm season growth, may go dormant in winter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carex praegracilis</td>
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<tr>
<td>California oatgrass</td>
<td>Moist, open mountain meadows</td>
<td>Densely tufted bunchgrass</td>
<td>1/2 inch</td>
<td>20-36 inches, including tall flower stalks</td>
<td>Active growth in cool season</td>
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<td>Danthonia californica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saltgrass</td>
<td>Floodplains and salt marshes</td>
<td>Rhizomatous, forms low mat, looks similar to bermuda grass</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>4-16 inches</td>
<td>Warm season growth, winter dormant</td>
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Naturally dormant during summer, but summer watering will keep green year round

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<tr>
<td>Red fescue</td>
<td>Coastal regions with 18+ inches of rain/year</td>
<td>Somewhat rhizomatous bunch grass, loosely tufted</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12-30 inches, including tall flower stalks</td>
<td>Cool or warm, depending upon temperature and water</td>
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<td>Festuca rubra</td>
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<td>Junegrass</td>
<td>Dry open sites in foothills/mountains</td>
<td>Bunchgrass</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>18-24 inches, including tall flower stalks</td>
<td>Cool season growth at low elevations</td>
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<td>Koeleria macrantha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coast range melic</td>
<td>Dry rocky hillsides and oak woodlands</td>
<td>Loosely tufted bunchgrass, can be rhizomatous</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>12-24 inches, including tall flower stalks</td>
<td>Active growth in cool season</td>
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<td>Melica imperfecta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idaho fescue</td>
<td>Foothill oak woodlands</td>
<td>Bunchgrass, cespitose or cushion-like form</td>
<td>1/8 inch</td>
<td>12-36 inches, including tall flower stalks</td>
<td>Cool season - dormant late summer to winter, growth starts in spring</td>
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<td>Festuca idahoensis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purple needlegrass</td>
<td>Central Valley and foothill grasslands</td>
<td>Bunchgrass</td>
<td>4 inches</td>
<td>12-40 inches, including tall flower stalks</td>
<td>Cool season - starts growth with first fall rains</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nasella pulchra</td>
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pinch the native soil over the top of the root mass so that the plug is sealed into the soil. Depending upon how much room you want for wildflowers or bulbs, plant your grass/sedge plugs 6 to 12 inches apart.

**Watering** Water once a week or so for the first couple months until the new grasses or sedges are well established. Most natives can get by on a deep watering about twice a month during the summer (May-October), although a few of the coastal species may need a bit more frequent watering here in our hot Central Valley summers.

**Diversifying your meadow** Consider using several different grass and sedge species in a single meadow; differing heights and textures can create an interesting mosaic. You may want to use different species in shady versus sunny exposures. It’s also a great idea to include flowering species in your meadow, since this greatly improves wildlife habitat by providing nectar and pollen for birds, butterflies, and bees. Bulbs (crocus, daffodils) and wildflower plugs (yarrow, milkweed) can be planted in the spaces between bunchgrasses, while other wildflowers (poppies, lupine) will sprout from sprinkled seeds.

**Workshop** If you want to learn more, Solano RCD will be hosting a “Replace Your Lawn” workshop at our native plant sale on Saturday, May 3rd from 10:00 to 11:00 at 6390 Lewis Road.

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### Wildflowers, like yarrow (Achillea millefolium), will increase the habitat value of your meadow. Photo by George Hartwell
The First Step: Removing your Lawn

By Miles Da Prato

So, are you ready to “close the valve” on your lawn and convert the yard space to a native grass or sedge meadow, a mulched shrub dominated design, or a hybrid of those mixed with home grown produce? There are several ways you can transition from a high water-use lawn to something much more water thrifty. I just went through this process myself, so I can share lessons learned from real life experience. One caveat is that the yard will go through a bit of an ugly phase during the transition. Don’t let anyone’s dubious looks worry you during this phase—keep your eye on the end result and you (and your neighbors) won’t be disappointed.

First the Preparation: Before getting started with the lawn killing method of choice, it is important to evaluate the existing irrigation system (where the risers are located, where the underground pipe runs, how deep, etc.) and what the new system will look like. In my case, I wanted to cap most of the existing sprinkler head locations and install a couple of drip irrigation source risers in their place that I could tie into. However, once I started digging, I discovered that the PVC 1/2 inch mainlines were only buried 3-4 inches deep and were likely to be damaged with my planned roto-tilling.

Take the time to dig around the existing riser locations and PVC mainline to ensure that they are compatible with your soil preparation and planting plans and make any necessary modifications. For example, if your’re converting to a meadow, you will likely require occasional sprinkler irrigation, so you will want to leave some risers in place, and increase riser height by 18”. A mulch and shrub-scape can be strictly drip irrigated— which entails capping most sprinkler risers and turning a couple into a drip supply source for the start of your drip line runs.

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Once the irrigation issues are sorted out, there are multiple ways to kill your lawn. Some people use a combination of techniques. There is no right or wrong way; your project timeline and comfort level will dictate which techniques you use and when. The timeline associated with my own lawn removal consisted of spring/summer lawn destruction followed by a winter, early spring installation of the replacement. Here are some options for lawn-killing:

Chemical Application: Make sure your lawn is healthy and well watered. Though it seems counterintuitive, a chemical application of an appropriate systemic (root penetrating) herbicide is most effective if applied to non-stressed/actively growing grasses. The primary grass species in my lawn was Bermuda grass. This is pretty much the worse-case scenario since this species has very extensive and strong root systems that are extremely resilient. Following all herbicide label safety and rate recommendations, I sprayed Round-Up herbicide to the actively growing grass in the spring. With this species, it was necessary to irrigate the lawn multiple times over the course of the summer to
stimulate growth so that a second spray was possible in the mid to late summer. When Bermuda is not present, one application may be all that is needed. Regardless of the species of grass, irrigate the seemingly dead stand to see if a follow up treatment is necessary.

**Mechanical Removal:** Ranging from small home use tractors or Bobcats, to the good old-fashioned shovel blade, another option (often complimentary to the chemical option) is to physically scrape out or rototill the sod layer into the soil. Be wary of using this technique alone when dealing with a species like Bermuda grass because the chopping of underground stems (called rhizomes) into smaller fragments can actually spread the grass around the yard. I strongly recommend considering a combination of techniques and extending your prep timeline when dealing with this species. Mechanical soil preparation is ideally done when there is some moisture in the soil beneath the lawn.

If you’re replacing the lawn with a mulched shrub planting or vegetable garden, the best timing is late winter/early spring. For a seeded or plugged meadow replacement, the best time is early fall. After the physical removal of the grass and upper root layer, irrigate and watch for re-sprouts and missed fragments. Repeat as necessary.

Creating a smooth and well prepared soil surface (amended with plenty of compost) with whatever equipment you settle on will help ensure the successful establishment of any new planting.

**Mulching:** The mulching option works by starving the grass of sunlight for an extended period of time. Overlapping layers of newspaper and cardboard has been shown to be an effective technique as has the application of a thick bark mulch layer (often 6-8 inches deep). With both techniques it is recommended to water the mulch after application to create an effective seal over the grass layer. The mulch layer can be left in place and easily planted into.

**Solarizing:** The solarizing technique works best in hot summer weather and effectively cooks the existing grass stand and many of the weed seeds stored in the top layer of soil. This can be done with either clear or black plastic tarps laid out over a recently trimmed and watered lawn area. The plastic must be fastened down to the ground fairly well with weights or staples to minimize the loss of heat. The length of time the plastic should stay on the ground is variable based on the level of heat generated (local summer temperatures) and the amount of stored energy in the root system of the grass. Check after 6-8 weeks and extend the solarizing period if necessary.

I found a couple of informative websites when getting started with my lawn removal:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/scmg/Lawn_Replacement/Grass_Removal_Methods/

Solano RCD Staff Directory

Marianne Butler Education Program Manager
707-301-5778 • Marianne.Butler@solanorcd.org

Miles DaPrato Restoration Project Manager
707-678-1655 x 120 • Miles.DaPrato@solanorcd.org

Michael Gordon Restoration Project Manager
707-678-1655 x 122 • Michael.Gordon@solanorcd.org

Jerah Frye Restoration Field Technician
Jerah.Frye@solanorcd.org

Katherine Holmes Restoration Program Manager
707-678-1655 x 118 • Katherine.Holmes@solanorcd.org

Amy King Watershed Project Manager
707-678-1655 x 109 • Amy.King@solanorcd.org

Andrea Mummert Conservation Project Manager
707-678-1655 x 112 • Andrea.Mummert@solanorcd.org

Judy Powell Office Manager
707-678-1655 x 101 • jkpowell@solanorcd.org

Chris Rose Executive Director
707-678-1655 x 119 • Chris.Rose@solanorcd.org

Jamie Solomon Education Program Coordinator
916-719-1609 • Jamie.Solomon@solanorcd.org

Seasonal Education & Restoration Staff:
Deborah Bartens, Don Broderson, Jeff Carlson, Duc Jones, Wendy Low, Carla Murphy & Marisa Britts

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Solano Resource Conservation District

Annual

Spring Plant Sale

May 3, 2014

8:00 am-12:00 pm

at the Conservation Education Center
6390 Lewis Road, Vacaville

Featuring California native & regionally appropriate plants
Join us for a FREE Water Thrifty Landscaping and Irrigation workshop from 10 to 11 am.

cash or checks only, please
Map is available at www.solanorcd.org

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