

Investing in an evergreen lawn

By Melanie Chambers • Bankrate.com

A year ago, Glenda Robb's front lawn looked like a land mine had exploded there. It was covered in deep holes and peppered with yellow spots thanks to her family's large dog. With two kids and a husband who also works full time, the Hamilton, Ont. family didn't have the time to manicure their lawn every weekend. So, when they saw a friend's perfect-looking fake lawn, they were sold.

"It's the best looking grass on the street," says Robb of her new lawn purchased at **Artificial Grass and Landscaping**. "It looks so realistic many people stop and just want to walk on it." The new lawn is also pet- and kid-friendly.

Since abandoning the real stuff, they've sold their lawn mower and weed whacker. This spring, they can also forgo the fertilizer and seeding ritual that is an annual chore for many homeowners. But is the grass that is truly greener also better? Read on to find out.

Better than AstroTurf

Those who detest mowing, fertilizing and weeding can now have perfect-looking lawns without all of the usual hassle. And if you have problems growing thick, green grass -- maybe you have bad soil or too many trees shading your lawn -- the synthetic grass may be just the thing for you.

Generally, pet owners are the No. 1 customers of fake lawns, but many pool owners also find these lawns helpful if you don't want grass clippings tracked into the pool.

Many synthetic lawn companies got their start making AstroTurf, the evergreen sports turf used for golf courses and football fields. While certainly durable, its rough texture is only comfortable if you are wearing head-to-toe padding and gear.

Today, residential lawns are softer, and look the part. Instead of offering perfectly green lawn, some companies offer two-toned grass, throwing in the odd brown or yellow blade to make it look more authentic.

Fake lawns are made of synthetic material -- polyethylene (recycled plastic) or nylon, or a combination of both. When polyethylene is laid down, the space between the blades is filled with tire rubber that has been frozen to remove any toxicity. This rubber helps keep the blades standing upright.

Nylon, the newer of the two materials on the market, does not use filler between the blades; it's considered the more substantial of the two materials and its blades can stand up on their own. For this reason, it is the pricier of the two.

The cost of being green

Price seems to be the biggest deterrent to buying a fake lawn, but if you calculate the total cost of lawn maintenance -- including fertilizer, gasoline for the mower, etc. -- over the average life of a synthetic lawn, then you stand a good chance of recouping your investment.

At Artificial Grass and Landscaping, near Hamilton, Ont., lawns ranging between 800 and 2,000 square feet cost \$8,000 to \$10,000 for a fully installed product with an eight-year warranty. The company uses a polyethylene product and installation is part of the package.

Environmentally friendly

According to Environment Canada, homeowners use about 14,000 litres of water annually to care for their lawns, and gas-powered lawnmowers emit as much air pollution as a car driven halfway across the country. So, switching to an artificial lawn is considered environmentally friendly.

The only maintenance fake lawns require is the occasional watering. If you have a dog, it's wise to power wash the lawn with a hose and apply a biodegradable cleaner once in a while. Alternatively, if you live in an arid climate, it's recommended that you hose off the dust every few weeks to keep your lawn looking its best.

Easy installation

When Robb had her fake lawn installed, it took the better part of a weekend. First, the entire lawn sod had to be removed. All traces of topsoil were excavated, to about six inches in depth, and then a gravel mixture was spread. On top of that, a layer of sand was spread to help ensure a compact foundation to prevent shifting (you don't want a lawn that slides around under your feet).

After that, the synthetic turf was laid down. Once spiked into place, it was ready for action.

Unfortunately, there isn't a lawn on the market yet that will rake itself, so owners of fake lawns still have to clean up leaves once or twice a year. Neither is there artificial turf that smells like real grass. Every spring when homeowners start trimming their lawns, the smell is unmistakable spring -- and no AstroTurf will even come close to the real deal.

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