



THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

FABULOUS FAKES: These 'lawns' save you a bundle



TURF YOUR MOWER

GARY YOKOYAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Lorenzo Valerio has a reason to dispense with his lawn mower. He had his lawn ripped up and replaced with artificial turf.

BY DANA BORCEA

When Eileen Valerio looks out her window lately, she sees strangers lurking around the house.

She watches them crouching low to inspect the ground.

They pat the lawn.

But Eileen doesn't chase them away.

Instead, she tolerates the gawking strangers who have come to see the new fake grass that has spurred a quiet

turf war in her central Mountain subdivision.

It started a few years ago, when a neighbour ordered fake sod for his yard.

Soon another lawn was ripped up and replaced with a blanket of artificial turf.

This spring Eileen's husband, Lorenzo, talked her into following suit, weeks after a neighbour did the same.

It took some convincing, but after

spending some lazy, hazy days sinking her bare feet into her new fake blades, Valerio says she's sold.

"There's no watering, no mowing ... nothing," says the busy mother of two, who adds that the family recently ditched their lawn mower and weed whacker.

They've also saved a bundle on water bills.

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TURF: A fake lawn saves on water, chemicals and the owner's time

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Lorenzo, who describes himself as "very picky," used to put in hours of yard work.

"I got sick and tired of fighting my lawn and losing," said the 41-year-old carpenter. "I'm ecstatic now because I have a perfect lawn every single day of the year."

The synthetic green stuff came courtesy of a Stoney Creek-based company called Artificial Grass and Landscaping Inc., which has outfitted 24 locations in Hamilton.

A house on Bridgette Drive in the Valerios' subdivision near Upper James Street and Stone Church Road was the first in the city to roll out the fake grass around four years ago.

Hundreds more have sprouted up across the province in recent years in a trend borrowed from southern states like California and Nevada where water is scarce.

Sales manager Robert Hodichak credits the growing

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demand that a low maintenance, lush lawn has for busy families.

Appearance comes in a distant second after the time and effort saved with no weeding, no watering or mowing.

He admits many clients are initially wary, but "once they see it down, they're convinced."

Pete Wobschall of Hamilton's Green Venture, a non-profit environmental organization, says anything that cuts down on unsustainable lawn care is a good thing.

"With climate change, we're getting extreme weather condi-

tions, longer drought periods and more of them," said the water conservation and organic lawn care specialist.

That means a lot more hoses getting turned on.

Environment Canada says around 14,000 litres of water are used each year to care for the average lawn.

Fake grass means not only turning off the sprinklers, but parking the lawn mower.

The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation estimates a typical gas-powered mower emits as much air pollution annually as a car driven halfway across the country.

Add to that 46 pounds of pesticides, 13 litres of gasoline and umpteen hours of yard work every year and the fake stuff starts looking a little friendlier.

Wobschall adds that real grass lawns are not strictly the "real deal" either since they aren't native to this climate.

"They're natural, somewhere in the world, just not here."

But before running barefoot through the fake grass with a clean conscience, Wobschall said he'd like to learn more about where it comes from and how long it lasts.

Here's the lowdown on the fake lawn.

The blades are made from polyethylene fibres, a recyclable plastic. The space between the blades is filled with black rubber pellets made from recycled tires which stabilize the grass and act like dirt.

The company brochure promises the non-toxic product is safe for children and pets.

It also says it's resistant to fire, salt damage and animal waste.

That means it will look the same in November as August. A plus for some perhaps, but less appealing to others.

A new plastic lawn doesn't come cheap.

At \$8 to \$15 a square foot, the price can range from \$5,000 to \$15,000.

"That includes installation," said Hodichak.

"It's not just rolling out a product. It includes excavation, grading to allow for proper drainage, and a stone-based screening."

Warranties promise hassle-free lawn care for many years to come.

The company also offers a colour palette.

"Some people like the look of picture perfect grass," says the brochure.

"Others prefer a more two-toned look that may blend better in their neighbourhood."

The Valerios opted for picture perfect.

"I wanted a more natural, yellowed look," said Eileen. "But Lorenzo wanted it green, green."

When word got out that more artificial grass was moving into the neighbourhood, the Valerios had to endure some good-natured teasing from neighbours.

Next door neighbour Bobbie

Dougan threatened to put a for sale sign on her lawn, but later said it looked more natural than the Astroturf appearance she dreaded.

As a prank, Lorenzo's brother put a dandelion in amongst the plastic grass. At the local pub, Lorenzo got plenty of razzing from friends.

"Are you going to vacuum it?" they would ask.

Across the street, Tracey Stringer shrugs and smiles when asked about the fake lawn.

"I wouldn't do it," she says, "but then I love my grass."

Stringer admits to feeling a bit of pressure when it comes to keeping up appearances on the well manicured street, but adds that it will probably take more than lawn care to divide this neighbourhood.

"We all get along really well and I don't think that grass is going to really be a deal breaker."

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