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## Fake grass gains ground in California amid concerns about ongoing drought

Makers and installers of synthetic turf say they are experiencing an unprecedented spike in residential business in California. (David Walter Banks/For The Washington Post)

By Rob Kuznia May 23

HERMOSA BEACH, CALIF. — Christopher Knight makes no apologies: He likes a green lawn. But the actor best known for playing middle son Peter on “The Brady Bunch” also wants to do his part to conserve water.

The solution? Fake grass.

“It feels totally different,” Knight, 57, marveled one day last week, stepping barefoot onto a deceptively lifelike expanse of newly installed plastic turf. “Frankly, I’m not really sure why more people haven’t started doing it.”

After [four blistering years of drought](#) in California, more people *are* doing it. The fake grass business is booming, much to the chagrin of some environmentalists and live-grass purists.

Comprehensive numbers are hard to come by, but makers and installers of synthetic turf say they are experiencing an unprecedented spike in residential business in California. From middle-class families who don’t want to forfeit the patch-of-green part of the American dream to megawatt celebrities who are mortified by TV coverage of their sprawling water-hog lawns, homeowners across the Golden State are ripping up sod and replacing it with plastic.

Christopher Knight, the actor who played Peter Brady on “The Brady Bunch” TV series, recently had artificial turf installed at his home in Hermosa Beach, Calif. (David Walter Banks/For The Washington Post)

“Everything is in California right now,” said David Barbera, president of Georgia-based Artificial Turf Supply, which opened both a warehouse and a sales office in Southern California last year. “We have doubled the size of our business in the past 12 months.”

The benefits of fake grass are hard to deny. Live grass guzzles some 55 gallons of water per square foot annually, making the all-American lawn increasingly untenable in an era of skyrocketing water rates and excessive-use penalties. Over the past two months, since Gov. Jerry Brown (D) [declared a state of emergency](#) and decreed that water use be cut by 25 percent this year, synthetic turf companies report an avalanche of interest.

In many parts of the state, the trend is being fueled by cash rebates of up to \$3.75 a square foot for installing low-water (or no-water) landscaping. The vast majority of rebate-takers go the

more natural — and cheaper — route of shrubs and succulents, officials said. But a growing number of homeowners are rejecting spiky deer grass and scratchy sagebrush and paying up to \$10 per square foot to luxuriate in plastic's convincing lushness.

“For people who want to play with their children — soccer, baseball, Frisbee — they can't do that in a front yard with cactus. You're going to get a needle in the rump,” said Ara Najarian, mayor of the Los Angeles suburb of Glendale, who has emerged as something of a synthetic turf champion.

To be sure, fake grass — known as “frass,” in some quarters — has its critics. Santa Monica, for instance, will not approve rebates for homeowners who install plastic. Sacramento and Glendale have long banned the installation of artificial turf in front lawns, as have some homeowner associations, which view the product as tacky.

Najarian has been waging a spirited campaign to get his city's ban overturned. “I've always been a firm believer that we need to give families the option,” he said. But Peter Fuad, president of the Northwest Glendale Homeowners Association, adamantly defends the ban.

“You can't be assured people won't buy the cheapest Home Depot special,” Fuad fretted during a recent City Council meeting. “Are you going to allow red, white and blue turf?”

Synthetic turf advocates dismiss such fears. Today's fake grass, they say, is nothing like the preternaturally green stuff that used to carpet the local miniature golf course.

The venerable Hollywood Bowl, one of the nation's most iconic amphitheaters, recently made the switch. Mark Ladd, the venue's assistant director of operations, notes that the fake greenery looks authentic: The height and color of the blades are varied, with a few brown ones thrown in to emulate dead thatch.

“Nobody has a truly perfect lawn,” Ladd said. “The old stuff would look really kitschy.”

Danna Freedman, owner of SYNLawN — a local wholesaler and affiliate of AstroTurf — says some of her most loyal clients are rich and famous. They include former California first lady Maria Shriver, comedian Steve Martin and actresses Julia Roberts and Laura Dern.

Freedman noted that SYNLawN artificial grass is made from soybean oil and recycled plastic bottles collected from national parks — an environmental bonus. Since the drought began, she said, her 12-year-old business has swelled by at least 50 percent a year, prompting her to hire nearly 20 additional employees.

Today's artificial turf is the descendant of AstroTurf, which was developed in the mid-1960s by chemical giant Monsanto. Originally called ChemGrass, it was rechristened after gaining fame in the newly erected Houston Astrodome, where the trials of maintaining indoor natural grass had compelled crews to paint the dead outfield green.

Since then, the product has traveled a bumpy road to sporting-field prominence, waxing and waning in accordance with technological improvements and [controversies over toxicity or injuries](#). The \$1 billion-a-year industry began expanding into the residential market in the 1990s.

Nevada, the Sagebrush State, was an early adopter. The percentage of Nevada residents taking a water-savings rebate for replacing natural grass with artificial turf has skyrocketed over the past decade. A quarter of lawn conversions now include an artificial turf component, according to the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

Doug Bennett, the agency's conservation manager, said he was initially skeptical that the product would hold up in the relentless sun. But to his surprise, many projects installed a decade ago remain intact.

A former horticulturist, Bennett has mixed feelings about faux turf. He wonders how the spent stuff affects the waste stream.

"It's made of plastic; it will degrade," said Lisa Cahill, director for sustainable solutions at TreePeople, an environmental nonprofit group based in Los Angeles. "And those pieces — even if very, very tiny — can end up in the ocean."

And synthetic turf can be hot to the touch on a sunny day, Bennett notes. Once, while standing at an outdoor party on a fake-grass lawn, he kicked off a flip-flop and stood on the grass.

"I leaped off onto the concrete," he said. "I literally would rather walk on concrete."

The Nevada water agency tries to take a middle-ground approach to lawn conversions, requiring a minimum number of live plants for the sake of the ecosystem. With a chuckle, Bennett recalled a woman who applied for a rebate with a landscaping blueprint that was 100 percent artificial, right down to the palm trees. Her rebate was denied.

"Google 'artificial palm trees.' They exist," he said.

For many artificial-turf enthusiasts, it isn't just about saving water. It's also about reconnecting with idyllic childhood memories.

Danna Ziv, who lives in Montecito near Santa Barbara, said her 2,000 square feet of fake lawn reminds her of playing on the grass as a child in the San Fernando Valley. Her father, the late Dan Blocker, played the character Hoss Cartwright on the 1960s TV western "Bonanza."

"My husband is from Israel," Ziv said. "He really wanted to have grass because they don't have a lot of it there."

For others, it's all about the environment. Olivier Roumy ditched his 25-year career as a high-end hairstylist for Washington politicians and moved to Los Angeles to work sales for DuraTurf, whose expanding list of clients include both Knight and the Hollywood Bowl.

“Everybody is concerned about the water. It’s a problem.” Roumy said, over the buzz of a power-broom grooming Knight’s new lawn. “So it makes me really feel like I’m helping the planet.”

Knight readily admits he had other motives for spending around \$4,000 for his new lawn and a matching patch of green on his rooftop balcony. While the rebate and the water conservation were important, he said, his primary consideration were the dog owners who pretended not to see his posted signs. (“No dog pee on wet lawn!”)

An endless stream of canine leg-lifters had left his grass blemished with yellow spots. “Now I don’t even have to worry about the damage,” he said, admiring the handiwork of the DuraTurf crew.

Still, Knight said, he plans to leave the dog-pee signs up.

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