

LAWN ALTERNATIVES & GROUNDCOVERS

Lawns are useful for recreation or places where people can relax. But turf requires frequent watering to stay green during our long dry season. There are many plants that can serve similar purposes as lawns while requiring much less water. Some accept light foot traffic (although few will thrive with heavy use), some give the appearance of a lawn with a meadow effect, many can serve as a background to set off other plantings, and all will provide vegetative cover to reduce erosion and conserve moisture in the soil.

Plants with a ✓ in the first column are lawn replacement favorites among Bay Area home gardeners. For information about how to convert a lawn to a Bay-Friendly garden, go to www.loseyourlawn.org



Favorites	Botanical Name	Common Name	CA Native	Sun/Soil	Height	Spread	Water Requirement	Reference*	Traffic Tolerance	Form	Maintenance
	<i>Achillea clavennae</i>	Silver yarrow		Full sun, reasonable drainage	4-12"	1-2'	Occasional	EBMUD	Little to none	Spreading mat	Can mow periodically
✓	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow		Full sun to part shade	12-30"	2-4'	Occasional	EBMUD	Occasional	Spreading mat	Can mow periodically
	<i>Achillea millefolium</i> 'Rosea'	Rose yarrow		Full sun to part shade	2'	2'	Occasional	EBMUD	Occasional	Spreading mat	Can mow periodically
	<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i>	Bearberry	●	Full sun, good drainage, coastal	1-2"	10-15'	None-Occasional	EBMUD	Little to none	Dense, fine-textured mat	
	<i>Arctotheca calendula</i>	Arctotheca		Full sun	6-12"	18"	Little-None	Sunset	Occasional	Thick groundcover	Invasive In wet areas, dormant in drought
	<i>Armeria maritima</i>	Sea pink	●	Sun, good drainage	4-8"	6-12"	Occasional-Little	EBMUD	Little to none	Compact mounds of grassy leaves	
	<i>Artemisia californica</i> 'Canyon Gray'	Prostrate sagebrush	●	Full sun	1'	4'	Occasional	EBMUD	None	Ground-hugging mat	
	<i>Artemisia pycnocephala</i> 'David's Choice'	Sandhill sage	●	Full sun	1'	3'	Occasional	EBMUD	None	Low-growing groundcover	
✓	<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>	Blue grama		Full sun	1.5-2'	1'	Little	Sunset	Occasional	Clump-forming grass	Can mow periodically
	<i>Campanula poscharskyana</i>	Serbian bellflower		Part shade	8"-1'	1'	Moderate/Moderate	Sunset/WUCOLS R1	Little to none	Spreading mounding leafy clump	
✓	<i>Carex pansa</i>	Meadow sedge	●	Full sun to part shade, most soils	1'	1'	Occasional-Moderate	EBMUD	Moderate	Groundcover/lawn substitute	Can mow 2-3 times per year
	<i>Carex praegracilis</i>	Dune sedge	●	Full sun to part shade, most soils	1'	1'	Occasional-Moderate	EBMUD	Moderate	Groundcover/lawn substitute	Can mow 2-3 times per year
	<i>Carex texensis</i>	Catlin sedge	●	Part to full shade, most soils	4-6"	6-8"	Occasional-Moderate	EBMUD	Moderate	Matlike sedge	Can mow periodically
	<i>Carex divulsa</i> (<i>tumulicola</i>)	Berkeley sedge	●	Part sun to part shade	1-2"	1-2'	Occasional-Moderate	EBMUD	Little to none	Clumping rough turf	
	<i>Ceanothus griseus</i> var <i>horizontalis</i> 'Carmel Creeper'	Carmel creeper ceanothus	●	Full sun, part shade, good drainage	18-30"	10-15'	Little-None	EBMUD	None	Evergreen groundcover	
	<i>Ceanothus hearstii</i>	Hearst ceanothus	●	Full sun, part shade	6"	6-8'	Little-None	EBMUD	Little to none	Mat forming groundcover	
✓	<i>Chamaemelum nobile</i>	Chamomile	●	Full sun, part shade	3-12"	1'	Moderate/Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Soft textured spreading mat	Can mow periodically
	<i>Coprosma x kirkii</i>	Creeping coprosma		Full sun	1-3'	4-6'	Moderate/Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Little to none	Groundcover	
✓	<i>Dymondia margaretae</i>	Silver carpet		Full sun to part shade, good drainage	1-3"	2'	Occasional-Moderate/Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Carpet of small green and white leaves	
	<i>Epilobium septentrionale</i>	California fuchsia	●	Full sun, part shade	8-12"	2-3'	None-Occasional	EBMUD	Little to none	Mat forming groundcover	
	<i>Festuca glauca</i>	Blue fescue		Sun, tolerate some shade	1'	10"	Occasional-Moderate/Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Dense tufts	
✓	<i>Festuca idahoensis</i>	Idaho fescue	●	Sun to light shade, most soils	1-2'	1-2'	Occasional-Moderate/Very Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Bunch grass	
✓	<i>Festuca rubra</i>	Red fescue	●	Sun to light shade, most soils	1-2'	1-2'	Moderate/Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Fine-bladed bunch grass	Can mow periodically
	<i>Fuchsia procumbens</i>	Prostrate fuchsia		Part shade	6"	3-4'	Regular/Moderate	Sunset/WUCOLS R1	Little to none	Prostrate spreading growth	
✓	<i>Fragaria chilensis</i>	Beach strawberry	●	Prefers sun, good drainage	4-8"	12-18"	Regular/Moderate	Sunset/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Lush compact mat	
	<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	Woodland strawberry	●	Shade, clay soil	4-8"	8-12"	Regular/Moderate	Sunset/WUCOLS R1	Little to none	Groundcover	
	<i>Koeleria macrantha</i>	Junegrass	●	Sun	1.5'	6"	Drought Tolerant - Flooding	Las Pilitas	Occasional	Perennial grass	
	<i>Lotus scoparius</i>	Deerweed	●	Sun	1.5-3'	3'	Drought Tolerant	Las Pilitas	Occasional	Low spreading	
	<i>Malvastrum lateritium</i>	Trailing mallow		Full sun	8"	5'	Little-None	EBMUD	Little to none	Evergreen groundcover	
✓	<i>Melica torreyana</i>	Torrey's melic	●	Part shade	1', flowers 2'	1'	None-Occasional	EBMUD	Moderate	Compact bunch grass	
	<i>Myoporum parvifolium</i>	Myoporum		Full sun	3-6"	10'	Little	EBMUD	Little to none	Mat forming groundcover	
✓	<i>Nassella lepida</i>	Foothill needlegrass	●	Sun	1'	1'	Occasional	EBMUD	Occasional	Forms a rough turf	
✓	<i>Nassella pulchra</i>	Purple needlegrass	●	Sun	1-2'	1-2'	Occasional	EBMUD	Occasional	Forms a rough Turf	
	<i>Nepeta racemosa</i>	Cat mint		Sun, good drainage	6-12"	2-3'	Occasional-Moderate/Low	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	None	Lavender flowers	
	<i>Phyla nodiflora</i>	Lippia		Full sun	2"	2'	Little-Regular/Low	Sunset/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Ground-hugging groundcover	
	<i>Rhamnus c.</i> 'Seaview Improved'	Coffeeberry	●	Sun/part shade, good drainage	1-2'	6-8'	Occasional	EBMUD	None	Groundcover	
	<i>Rubus pentalobus</i>	Rubus		Part shade	6"-1'	6'	Occasional	EBMUD	None	Groundcover	

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	<i>Salvia melifera</i> 'Terra Seca'	Prostrate sage	●	Full sun	2'	6'	Occasional	EBMUD	Little to none	Extra tough groundcover	Pinch or shear upward-growing branches
	<i>Salvia sonomensis</i>	Creeping sage	●	Full sun	8-12"	3-4'	Occasional	EBMUD	Little to none	Groundcover	
	<i>Salvia spathacea</i>	Pitcher sage	●	Full sun	1-2'	3-4'	Drought Tolerant- Regular	Sunset	Little to none	Groundcover	
	<i>Satureja douglasii</i>	Yerba Buena	●	Part shade	6"	3'	Regular	Sunset	Little to none	Good oak woodland understory	
✓	<i>Thymus pseudolanuginosus</i>	Wooly thyme		Full sun/part shade	2-3"	3'	Occasional- Moderate/Moderate	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Low compact groundcover	
✓	<i>Thymus serpyllum</i> 'Elfin'	Creeping thyme		Full sun/part shade	3"	3'	Occasional- Moderate/Moderate	EBMUD/WUCOLS R1	Occasional	Low compact groundcover	
✓	<i>Trifolium repens</i>	White clover		Full sun/part shade	4"		Regular/Moderate	Sunset/WUCOLS R1	Little to none	Low groundcover	
	<i>Whipplea modesta</i>	Western modesty	●	Part shade	1"-4"	2-3'	Regular	Las Pilitas	Little to none	Good oak woodland understory	

Reference sources:

EBMUD: *Plants and Landscapes for Summer-Dry Climates*, May 2004, Nora Harlow (editor).

Las Pilitas: Las Pilitas Nursery Website, www.laspilitas.com

Sunset: *Sunset Western Garden Book*, Sunset Publishing Corp.

WUCOLS R1: Water Use Classifications of Landscape Species for Region 1 (No. Central Coast), University of California Cooperative Extension.

The Bay-Friendly approach to landscapes and gardens was pioneered in Alameda County by StopWaste in collaboration with home gardeners, landscape professionals and public agencies. Find out more at www.StopWaste.org.

