

## The “Smother Method” of Lawn Removal

*By Mimi Andersen of Garden Magic Company*

For several years now, Mike Garcia of Enviroscape and I have been teaching a popular class at the MBBG called “Getting Rid of Your Water-Guzzling Lawn.” We help intrepid gardeners map out a safe journey going from their water-sucking high-maintenance lawn to an environmentally friendly water-wise, wildlife-friendly garden. This article focuses on one method Mike and I recommend to kill turf grass called the “Smother Method.”

As the name implies, this lawn-killing method works by using newspaper or cardboard and mulch to block the sunlight, restricting water and airflow to the lawn. The grass dies slowly, decomposing into the soil and becoming organic compost. With this organic method, chemicals, such as herbicides, which have proven to be harmful to soil microorganisms, are not needed.

**Materials** Newspaper or light-weight cardboard to cover the entire targeted area.

Organic mulch, such as tree trimmings made of wood chips, dried leaves, bark, and small sticks, works great. You will need enough to cover the entire targeted area five to seven inches. Avoid using sawdust. (See Mulch Sources below.)

Wheelbarrow, buckets, shovel, and/or pitchfork for handling mulch.

Family and friends to help if you have a large area.

**Step 1** If your lawn is three inches or higher, mow first so the paper and mulch can be laid evenly on top. Do not rototill as this spreads weed and lawn seeds. For areas of Bermuda grass, use a shovel to carefully deep dig roots of this fast spreading grass and dispose of it in your green waste.

Extra-step (optional): Turn your water off first. If you do not mind the appearance, turn off your sprinklers and stop watering your lawn until it turns yellow. We have found this especially effective for thick lawns or lawns planted in clay soils. After the lawn yellows, you can scrape off some of the dead grass, placing it into a green waste bin before smothering. Meanwhile, collect and save newspapers or thin cardboard until enough is gathered to cover the targeted area.

**Step 2** Lay flat pieces of light-weight cardboard or layered newspaper (10–12 sheets thick) so the grass is covered in all directions. You will want to overlap the newspaper two inches or so, like roof shingles. You may need to hose the paper down once and apply some mulch as you go, so the paper does not blow away.

**Step 3** Apply a thick five-inch to seven-inch layer of organic mulch evenly over all the cardboard/newspaper.

**Step 4** Water the mulch and newly covered newspaper or cardboard well until nicely compacted.

**Step 5** Now wait! You will need to wait at least two months for the grass to die. Once the paper layers are nearly decomposed, use a shovel to check for grass rhizomes or underground runners; when they appear brown and dead (no longer yellow), it is time to plant.

As you wait, plan your garden. If you are replacing your front yard lawn, make sure to look around the neighborhood at the many creative things people are growing instead of lawn.

## FAQs

**Is Herbicide safe?** MBBG advocates Earth-friendly gardening practices and therefore does not recommend Roundup or other herbicides.

**Is it OK to rototill?** No! Rototilling brings weed seeds to the surface and chops up rhizomatous grasses like Bermuda grass causing them to spread.

**Are newspapers toxic?** These days, newspapers use soy based inks so they are relatively safe.

**Where can one obtain organic mulch?** The City of Manhattan Beach may soon have a program where residents can obtain free local mulch. Until then, a source for load-your-own free mulch is courtesy of the L.A. City Bureau of Sanitation, Solid Resources Processing and Construction Division in San Pedro. Mulch is delivered to 1400 Gaffey Street each Friday and the facility is open every day from 7:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. for pick up. Bring your own shovel and bag, or pick up and load up your own containers. Take as much as you need. All are welcome. To check supplies (it goes fast!) or for questions, call (818) 834-5112.. Organic mulch is also available at most garden centers.

**Will I never need to weed again?** – Weeding will be greatly decreased, but never say never. Stay vigilant in the first year by hand digging Bermuda grass and always keep your garden mulched to keep weeds at bay. Mulch is key; maintain a two- to four-inch layer at all times. To promote plant health, keep mulch two inches from small plants, four inches from shrubs and at least six to twelve from tree trunks.

**What websites or books are recommended?** – Two websites:

<http://www.lesslawn.com/articles/article1032.html> and

[http://landscaping.about.com/od/alternativestograss/a/how\\_kill\\_grass.htm](http://landscaping.about.com/od/alternativestograss/a/how_kill_grass.htm)

One great book: *Reimagining the California Lawn: Water-conserving Plants, Practices, and Designs* by Carol Bornstein, David Fross, and Bart O'Brien.

Note: One exemption to easy success using the “Smother Method” would be an entire lawn comprised of Bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*). At MBBG we call it Devilgrass. This invasive species is native to Africa and is made up of short aboveground shoots or stolons as well as long belowground rhizomes. These unique characteristics make it an effective soil stabilizer along Africa’s riverbanks, but a nearly impossible foe to rid from the American yard. For this reason, manual removal by digging out with a shovel is recommended before commencing the “Smother Method.” For more information on Bermuda grass, go to the UC IPM Online Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program webpage at <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7453.html>