

Homeowners weary of yardwork are turning to 'hardscaping,' replacing grass and plants with low-maintenance stone or concrete. Some are keeping things green with fake vegetation.



By June Fletcher, The Wall Street Journal

Michael Kulik recently invited the bulldozers in to tear up his quarter-acre Falls Church, Va., backyard. The \$90,000 redo he has planned will include a hot tub and gazebo, an outdoor fireplace and grill, a multilevel paved terrace -- and very few plants.

Kulik, a professional photographer, says he was tired of spending hours every week trimming the azaleas and hollies and trying to get grass to grow under the oak trees. "For me, the backyard had become a war zone."

Here's what's on the way out in landscaping: grass, flowers and trees. Frustrated by extreme changes in the weather -- floods this year, droughts last year -- some homeowners are simply giving up. They're replacing ferns and palms with lifelike fakes, pulling up the sod and putting down stone, concrete and other types of paving, and drastically shrinking planting beds.

"It's garden fatigue," says Bruce Butterfield, the director of research for the National Gardening Association in Burlington, Vt.

Lawn and garden sales have been declining for the past three years, according to the group. Sales totaled \$35.2 billion in 2005, down 4% from the year before. And it's not just the wiggly weather: Many homeowners are aging, says Butterfield, or are simply wearying of maintaining elaborate plantings or competing with the neighbors for the showiest roses.

Even professionals like Josh Dean, a landscape designer in Burke, Va., are paving over their green space. In January 2006, Dean replaced most of his backyard with a huge flagstone patio. "I was tired of dealing with the overgrown grass and poison ivy," he says.

Low-maintenance yards

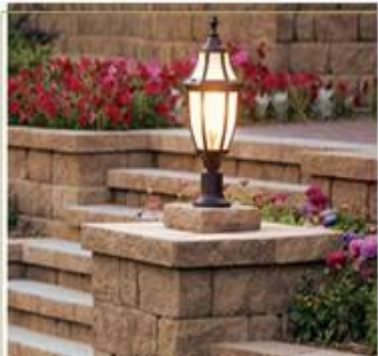
Although the use of stone, concrete and crushed gravel on residential properties isn't new, the switch from landscaping to "hardscaping" has started to gain traction in the past few years, as more homeowners have begun to think of their gardens and backyards as outdoor rooms. David Watkins, the general manager of Merrifield Gardening Center in Merrifield, Va., says that a decade ago, the company rarely had requests to do hardscaping.

But now, many customers say they would rather spend their weekends relaxing and entertaining in these tricked-out spaces -- complete with weather-resistant rugs, kitchens and built-in televisions -- than pushing around lawn mowers and pulling weeds. In the past year, the company's hardscaping sales have increased 20%, even though the cost for paving is around \$25 a square foot installed, more than 10 times the cost of sod. Customers want a low-maintenance yard, Watkins says.

Some want no maintenance at all. Last spring, businessman Kim Melrose spent \$25,000 having the yard of his home in Rancho Mirage, Calif., torn up so it could be paved with cream-colored concrete, textured to look like travertine stone. His yard has a pool, a covered barbecue, a kitchen with a dishwasher, a two-burner cooktop, a stainless-steel sink and a bar with granite countertop -- and not a blade of grass.

"It's so easy to take care of," says Melrose, adding that now he can host parties of 50 people without worrying about what's being trampled underfoot.

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