

LESS LAWN MORE TREES

Best Practices for Existing Trees During Lawn Conversion

California's new lawn watering rules (AB 1572) were created to help save potable (drinking) water by phasing out its use for irrigating nonfunctional turf—lawns that serve no recreational or community purpose—at most commercial, industrial, and institutional (CII) properties, including common areas managed by homeowner associations (HOAs). But **removing lawn can affect nearby trees**—especially if they're used to regular watering.

California poppy *Eschscholzia californica*, California native

This guide explains how to protect your existing trees while creating a more water-wise landscape.

Trees are Worth Protecting

Trees offer big benefits for neighborhoods and the environment—often saving more water than they use.

- They cool the air and shade streets and property
- They retain soil moisture and reduce runoff
- They filter pollution and support birds, pollinators, and other wildlife
- They add beauty and value to businesses, homes, and communities

Lawn Removal Can Stress Trees

Removing lawn helps save water—but it can hurt trees if done the wrong way. **Be careful to avoid:**

- Damaging roots by digging or scraping anywhere under the tree canopy
- Removing lawn without updating irrigation to keep trees healthy
- Cutting off irrigation too quickly
- Heat stress from replacing lawn with gravel, bare soil, or hard surfaces
- Chemical or soil damage from herbicides used in lawn removal or soil compaction



Important Note: Trees Do Not Make Lawn Functional

Planting new trees does not make an area functional lawn. New trees must be placed on separate irrigation systems.

CARING FOR TREES IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Plan with Trees in Mind

When planning a landscape transformation, keep these tree-friendly practices in mind:

- Involve your HOA, residents, property manager, or grounds crew early to help them understand the value and care needs of mature trees.
- Group plants with similar water needs to improve irrigation efficiency and reduce waste.
- Create a separate watering zone for trees so you can adjust the schedule based on their specific needs—even if other plants are nearby.
- Work with an irrigation expert to switch to more water-efficient watering methods.
- Schedule lawn removal during cooler months to reduce stress on trees.
- Use temporary pathways or barriers to prevent soil compaction near tree roots during construction.

Water the Right Way

- Water slowly and deeply—about 18 inches down.
- Target watering at the drip line (outer edge of the tree branch canopy).
- Check moisture with a screwdriver or soil moisture probe. If it's dry 6 inches down, it's time to water.
- *Newly planted trees:* Water using slow methods like a bucket with a small hole.
- *Mature trees:* Use a soaker hose around the drip line.
- Use non-potable water where available (e.g., recycled, well, or canal water).
- Consider reusing water on-site if it's clean enough. For example, rainwater or air conditioning condensate might be okay. Don't use water that contains chemicals or high salt levels—like the water drained from cooling towers.

Less Lawn = Healthy Trees and cooler communities, cleaner air, and smarter landscapes.

Protect yours during the transition to a low-water future.

Mulch Helps Trees Thrive

Note: Check your local fire code or defensible space regulations for any mulch requirements or restrictions near structures.

- Spread mulch in a 4-foot-wide ring, 4 inches deep, and 4 inches away from the trunk.
- Use wood chips or other organic material to keep soil cool and moist.
- Avoid gravel and weed fabric near trees—these trap heat and hurt roots.
- Add fresh mulch each year to help retain soil moisture and prevent weeds from growing.

Get the Right Help

Need support? Help is available.

- Certified arborists can assess tree health and develop care plans—visit TreesAreGood.org to find one near you.
- Landscape design professionals trained in water efficiency can help with more robust designs for a tree-friendly layout.
- Irrigation specialists can help with simpler system changes to ensure adequate water application, equipment, and scheduling for areas that don't require a full makeover.
- Use tools like Calscape at calscape.org, California Native Plant Society at cnps.org, and the Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS) at ccuh.ucdavis.edu/wucols to select low-water native trees and plants.
- Rebates may be available from your local water provider for planting trees or replacing lawn.

Watering Trees When Lawn Watering Stops

Even if lawn watering has to stop under the new rules, trees in those areas can continue to receive the water they need. **Yes, trees in nonfunctional lawn areas may still be watered with potable water. However, you'll need to change how you water to focus only on the tree and avoid wasting water.**

Smart ways to irrigate:

- Adjust sprinklers so they water only under the tree canopy.
- Cap or turn off heads that irrigate surrounding unused lawn.
- Switch to tree bubblers/drip irrigation for better efficiency.
- Consider replacing nearby lawn with mulch or low-water plants, but make sure new irrigation still meets the trees' needs.
- Use cycle-and-soak methods—short watering cycles with breaks between—to let water soak in deeply and avoid runoff.