

# Bye-bye, lawnmower



## Artificial grass is taking root with some local homeowners

STORY BY NANCY HARPER

**ABOVE:**Tara Graham  
**FACING PAGE:**  
Low-maintenance synthetic grass in the Graham's front yard.  
**PHOTOGRAPHY •**  
TOMASZ ADAMSKI

Imagine spending more hours swinging in your hammock next summer than fussing over the grass below it. It's a liberating concept, especially for anyone who's been tethered to a lawnmower for one too many seasons.

It's also one of the many perks of having a lawn that's not only 100 per cent fake, but also easy on the eye.

Artificial turf has come a long way in

recent years.

Guelph homeowners Darleen and Mark Cunningham are among the converts.

They decided to have artificial turf installed in 2009 after becoming frustrated with the swampy conditions that had made their backyard an uninhabitable mess.

"I just got tired of the whole hassle, and I didn't want to have to deal with the water and mud anymore," Darleen explains. "We had lots of mosquitoes, lots of bugs. It was mucky. You couldn't really enjoy it — I wanted to do something where I could



Darleen and Mark Cunningham

PHOTOGRAPHY • CHRIS SETO

really enjoy our backyard.”

Darleen says going artificial was the best decision she and her husband could have made. “There’s nothing I don’t love about it,” she

says. “It’s absolutely amazing. We have frogs that’ll come and sit in the grass. The squirrels like it. There are no weeds. I don’t have to worry about maintenance. You’re

not paying for a lawnmower. One of the funniest looks I get is when people say, ‘I have to mow my lawn,’ and I say, ‘Yeah, I have to vacuum my grass.’ ”

Even for Waterloo Region’s most upmarket homes, where esthetics is everything, artificial turf is starting to be an option.

One company promoting artificial grass is Landscape Effects Group, the southwestern Ontario distributor of Synlawn. Account manager Jay Lutsch says the fact that luxury homeowners pride themselves on perfection is the very reason some are choosing synthetic grass.

“Instead of planting grass, they’ll use artificial turf for specific areas where they don’t want any maintenance and they want it looking 100 per cent beautiful all year round,” Lutsch says.

Tara and Shane Graham of Waterloo jumped on the synthetic-turf bandwagon 10 years ago when they had their backyard

done. They loved it so much they had the front yard done two years ago — and now summer Saturdays are theirs to do whatever they like.

“Grass is hard to maintain in our neighbourhood because of the dandelions and weeds in the nearby parks,” Tara says. “And we have an atrocious grade. We’re lower than our back-door neighbours and our yard was a swamp constantly — and we have a dog. This was the cleanest method, the easiest, and the lowest maintenance.”

These days, Tara loves the way her lawn looks — and gets a kick out of the many passers-by who stop to “pet” her grass while out for an evening stroll.

“People have to take a double take,” she says. “You have to really look to think if it’s artificial or not.”

Maurice Nelischer, professor emeritus and director for sustainability at the University of Guelph, notes that one drawback is that

no worms or bugs live in artificial turf so “it is a dead zone ecologically.”

In an email interview, however, he added that potential buyers have to balance those concerns against “the reduction in environmental damage due to watering, fertilizing and mowing that same piece of ground.”

As for any possibility of contaminants leaching into the ground from the artificial turf’s composition, Nelischer says: “Frankly I don’t think it is big enough to worry about. Especially when you think of the stuff that is on our roads, and the water washes it away and eventually into the ground — that stuff has heavy metals and weird chemicals in it in way larger amounts.”

Much of the concern around chemicals in artificial turf relates to the tiny black rubber crumbs (chunks of old tires) of which many sports fields are made. But this rubber infill, which helps support grass fibres and adds

an extra layer of protection when people fall, has been proven safe in more than 50 independent studies, according to the non-profit Synthetic Turf Council.

As well, the landscaping market in North America has been moving away from rubber infill and several organic infills are now available, including cork and ground fibres from coconut shells.

Synlawn marketing manager Michelle Balicki says her company led major changes in the industry by eliminating the need for rubber crumb in residential applications. The company uses renewable resources such as silica sand, a 100-per-cent organic product known as Zeofill, and coated sand instead.

The process of installing artificial turf at home is a lot like putting in a cement driveway, Lutsch says. A typical suburban front lawn installation takes about two days from start to finish. The price runs between



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Low-maintenance synthetic grass in the Graham's backyard PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI

\$8 and \$12 per square foot, including installation.

The installer digs down about six inches, then lays a six-inch aggregate base. This is the most important part of the procedure because if it's not done correctly, there won't be the proper amount of drainage and the turf will start peeling up.

There are many applications other than residential, including playgrounds, high-traffic pet areas, golf driving ranges and putting greens, roof and deck systems, and sports grounds.

"You see (the trend) in California right now," Lutsch says. "And as time goes on and we get stricter with the consumption of water and the use of pesticides, this is pretty much what you're going to see. Cities are trying to go greener and greener. They just install the turf and once a year give it a power broom and they're good to go. They're starting the trend in this area and it's being followed by homeowners." 

For information on artificial turf options, including the different types of infill materials, follow the links on the website of the Synthetic Turf Council, a non-profit trade association: [www.syntheticurfCouncil.org](http://www.syntheticurfCouncil.org) > For the Public > Frequently Asked Questions

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SYNTHETIC TURF

**1966:** A new era in sports is ushered in at the Houston Astrodome. The real grass at the world's first domed stadium — grass that was no longer receiving sunlight — is replaced with the first-ever artificial surface: a green "carpet" made of nylon fibres.

**1970:** Synthetic turf is introduced to Europe. Made of polypropylene instead of nylon fibers, it has closely packed tufts that soften the surface so players are at less risk of injury.

**Late 1970s:** Second-generation synthetic turf fields feature tufts that are further apart and more closely resemble natural grass, with sand spread between the fibres to create firmness and stability.

**Late 1990s:** Third-generation turf has longer fibres spaced even further apart and made with polyethylene, which is kinder to the skin. Fields are spread with rubber granules as well as sand to create an even more comfortable playing surface.

**Today:** Synthetic turf is used in all kinds of ways, from residential lawns and commercial spaces to dog runs, pools, parks, playgrounds, putting greens and patios.



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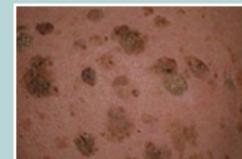
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