

research highlights

URBAN LANDSCAPING

Lawn legacy

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Visitors to the American Southwest may think that lush green lawns in a desert landscape manifest the desire of new residents to deny that they live in a desert. Kelli Larson and her colleagues have found that the opposite is in fact true. Such landscapes are the legacy of homeowners from decades ago, while newer households tend to embrace their arid surroundings.

Examining the preferences and existing state of front and back lawns for several hundred respondents in dozens of sites in Phoenix, Arizona, USA, the researchers looked at differences between mesic (full grass), oasis (a combination of turf and gravel) and xeric lawns, which use rocks and gravel with drought-tolerant plants. Homeowners tend to prefer xeric front lawns, but mesic lawns in the back. However, their actual lawns do not always match up with their preferences. This may be a reflection of the already existing lawns when the homes are bought.

Households with mesic yards were significantly older than oasis and xeric yards,



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suggesting that there is a path dependency. Yards, once installed, are either too expensive to remove or show the preferences of people who have lived in Phoenix for a considerable portion of their lives. Alternatively, newer residents of homes in the desert may prefer

to avoid such features. Either way, the legacy of lawns from decades ago will continue to affect water usage in the city for the foreseeable future.

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