What to Expect from a Professional Synthetic Turf Installation

When I first started working in landscaping in the East Bay, most homeowners had never heard of synthetic turf. A few early adopters in the Tri-Valley had installed small patches for putting greens, but the idea of replacing an entire lawn with artificial grass seemed foreign. Fast forward a decade, and I have spent more time on synthetic turf installation than on nearly any other landscaping task. The shift happened for good reason: water restrictions, maintenance costs, and a desire for usable outdoor living space all pushed homeowners toward a realistic alternative to natural grass. But not every installation is the same, and the difference between a lawn that looks fake and one that fools the neighbors comes down to the details.

Understanding the Core Components

Before we get into the process, it helps to know what goes into a modern synthetic turf system. The industry has moved well beyond the shiny, plastic-looking carpets of the 1990s. Brands like AstroTurf and SYNLawn now produce fibers that mimic the color variation and texture of real grass. You can find products designed specifically for pets, known as Pet Turf, which have antimicrobial infill and drainage that handles urine without odor. And if you want a practice surface for golf, a Putting Green product gives you a tighter pile and a more consistent roll.



The key is that every good synthetic turf installation depends on the same foundation: base preparation. Without a solid base, the turf will wrinkle, shift, or hold water. That is where a landscaping contractor earns their keep. We are not just rolling out a green carpet. We are building a layered system that supports drainage, resists compaction, and stays flat for years.

Base Preparation Is the Real Work

I have seen homeowners try to cut corners by skipping base prep. They think they can just lay artificial grass over dirt and call it done. It never works. The ground settles, the turf develops low spots, and within a year the lawn looks like a rumpled bedsheet. A proper base starts with excavation. You need to remove several inches of native soil to make room for the base materials. How deep depends on the site and the intended use, but four to six inches is typical.

After excavation, we bring in crushed rock or decomposed granite and compact it with a plate compactor. This machine vibrates the material into a dense, stable layer. If the base is not compacted well, the turf will sink under foot traffic. For areas with heavy rain or poor drainage, we install a permeable base with a drainage board beneath it. The drainage board acts as a channel for water to escape, preventing puddles from forming under the turf. I have seen

installations in low-lying yards in the East Bay where a drainage board turned a swampy mess into a usable lawn.



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Drainage and Infill: The Unsung Heroes

Water management is probably the most overlooked part of synthetic turf installation. People assume artificial grass is waterproof, but water can still pool on top if the backing is not permeable. That is why we use a permeable base and often a drainage board under the turf itself. The combination allows rain and pet urine to filter through the backing, into the base, and away from the surface. Without it, you get standing water that breeds mosquitoes and smells like a kennel.

Infill is another component that many homeowners do not know about until they see it. After the turf is laid and seamed, we spread a granular infill across the fibers. This material, often made of silica sand or coated granules, weighs down the turf and helps the blades stand upright. It also provides a cushion underfoot. For Pet Turf installations, we use an antimicrobial infill that neutralizes odors. The infill is brushed into the pile with a power broom, which fluffs the fibers and gives the lawn a natural, lived-in look.

Seaming and Stretching: Where Skill Shows

One of the hardest parts of any synthetic turf installation is making the seams disappear. If you have ever seen a turf lawn with a visible line running across it, you know how much it ruins the effect. That seam line comes from poor cutting or incorrect seaming technique. We use seam tape and a professional-grade adhesive to bond the edges of each turf roll together. The tape sits beneath the backing, so the seam is invisible from above. But getting it right requires patience and a steady hand. You have to cut the turf so the fibers interlock, and you have to apply even pressure along the entire seam. A plate compactor is useful here, too, to press the tape into the backing.

Stretching the turf is equally important. Unlike carpet, synthetic turf does not have a lot of give. If you lay it without tension, it will buckle in the heat. We stretch the turf taut before securing it with perimeter nails or staples. In California, where summer temperatures can hit the triple digits, a loose installation will expand and wrinkle. A tight installation stays flat.



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Custom Installation for Outdoor Living

More and more homeowners in the Tri-Valley are using synthetic turf as part of a larger outdoor living design. They want a seamless transition from a paver patio to a lawn area, or they want a putting green tucked into the corner of the yard. That is where custom installation matters. It is not just about the turf itself, but about how it integrates with other hardscapes. Pavers and artificial grass need to share the same base elevation. If the base for the pavers is different from the base for the turf, you end up with a trip hazard at the transition. A good landscaping contractor plans the whole grade at once, so the finished surface is level from one material to the next.

I worked on a project last year where the homeowner wanted a putting green surrounded by a decomposed granite path and a paver seating area. The putting green required a firmer base and a different infill than the rest of the turf. We used a putting green product with a shorter pile and a denser fiber, and we installed a drainage board under the entire green to handle runoff from the adjacent hardscape. The result looked like a private golf course. That kind of custom installation takes more time and more planning, but the payoff is an outdoor space that feels intentional.

Warranty and Long-Term Care

Most reputable manufacturers and contractors offer a warranty on their turf products. The warranty typically covers fading, fiber degradation, and manufacturing defects. It does not cover damage from pets, heavy furniture, or improper maintenance. That is why it pays to understand what you are buying. A cheap synthetic turf installation might come with a one-year warranty, while a premium system from a brand like SYNLawn or AstroTurf can carry a ten- or fifteen-year warranty. The warranty is only as good as the installation, though. If the base fails or the seams separate, the warranty on the turf itself will not help you. That is why you want a contractor who stands behind the whole system.

Maintenance for synthetic turf is minimal but not zero. You need to rinse it occasionally to remove dust and pollen. Pet owners should hose down pet areas weekly and apply a turf deodorizer. Leaves and debris should be raked or blown off, because organic material can break down and stain the fibers. The infill may need to be topped up every couple of years, especially in high-traffic areas. And you should brush the turf with a power broom or a stiff rake to keep the fibers from matting down. But compared to mowing, watering, fertilizing, and weeding a natural lawn, the upkeep is almost nothing.



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Is Synthetic Turf Right for Your Yard?

Not every yard is a good candidate for synthetic turf. If you have a lot of shade, a natural lawn might struggle anyway, so turf could be a good solution. If you have heavy clay soil that drains poorly, the cost of excavating and installing a permeable base can add up. And if you simply love the look and feel of real grass, no amount of technology will replace it. But for homeowners in the East Bay and Tri-Valley who want a green lawn without the water bill, or who want a putting green or a pet-friendly yard that does not turn into mud, synthetic turf installation offers a durable, realistic alternative. The key is investing in the process: base preparation, proper drainage, quality infill, and skilled seaming. Cut those corners, and you will regret it. Do it right, and you will have a lawn that looks good year-round with almost no work.