What to Know Before Starting an Artificial Grass Installation

I have worked on residential lawns and commercial landscapes across California for over a decade, and one question I hear more than any other is whether artificial grass is worth the upfront effort. The short answer is yes, but only if the artificial grass installation is done right. A poor job can lead to buckling, pooling water, and a surface that feels more like a doormat than a lawn. A proper job, on the other hand, gives you a low-maintenance lawn that looks green year-round with almost no upkeep.

Start with the Base, Not the Grass

The most common mistake I see on jobs is rushing the ground preparation. People want to see green, so they lay the turf first and think about drainage later. But the base is what makes or breaks the whole project. For any artificial grass installation, the ground needs a stable drainage base. In most California soils, that means excavating four to six inches of topsoil and filling it with a compacted layer of decomposed granite or a similar paver base material. Decomposed granite compacts well and lets water pass through, which prevents the turf from turning into a sponge after a rain.



I once worked on a commercial landscape in Sacramento where the crew skipped the decomposed granite and just laid the turf over native clay. Within three months, the surface had low spots that collected water. We had to pull up the whole field, re-excavate, and start over. That job taught me that the base is not the place to cut corners.

Weed Barrier and Perimeter Edging

After the base is compacted and leveled, a weed barrier goes down. This is a woven fabric that blocks sunlight from reaching the soil below. Without it, you will be pulling weeds through the turf within a season. The weed barrier should overlap at the seams by at least six inches, and it should be pinned down so it does not shift when you add the infill later.

Perimeter edging is another detail that people often overlook. If the edge of the turf is not secured, it will start to curl or separate from walkways and patios. I prefer a flexible paver edging or a metal landscape edging that is staked into the ground. For areas with heavy foot traffic, a thicker aluminum edge holds up better than plastic. The edging also helps keep the infill material from washing out onto your pavers or driveway.



artificial grass installation

Seaming and Securing the Turf

When the base and edging are ready, it is time to lay the artificial grass itself. The rolls of synthetic turf are cut to fit the space, and the seams are joined with seam tape and adhesive. This is a step where patience pays off. The seam tape should be placed on a clean, dry surface, and the turf edges should be butted together as tightly as possible. If there is a gap, even a quarter-inch wide, it will show up as a brown line in a few months because the infill will settle into the gap.

After the seams are set, the turf is stretched and stapled around the perimeter. I use a power broom to brush the fibers upright before adding the infill. The power broom does two things: it fluffs the grass so it looks natural, and it reveals any low spots or wrinkles that need to be fixed before the final step.

Infill and the Power Broom

Infill is the material that goes on top of the turf to weigh it down and support the blades. For residential lawns, a silica sand or a specialized turf infill works well. For pet turf, I recommend an infill that includes an antimicrobial treatment to control odors. The infill is spread evenly across the surface and then brushed into the fibers with the power broom. This step can take a couple of passes. The goal is to get the infill down to the base of the blades without packing it so tight that the grass lies flat.

One thing I have learned the hard way is that too much infill is worse than too little. If you overload the turf, the infill will migrate to the edges and leave the middle feeling spongy. A good rule of thumb is to use about two pounds per square foot for standard residential lawns, and a bit less for pet turf so the drainage stays fast.

Artificial Grass Maintenance After Installation

A common misconception is that artificial grass requires zero maintenance. It does not need mowing or watering, but it does need occasional care. Artificial grass maintenance includes brushing the fibers with a power broom or a stiff rake to keep them from matting down, especially in high-traffic areas. Leaves and debris should be blown off regularly, and the infill may need to be topped up every year or two.



artificial grass installation

For pet owners, rinsing the turf with a hose every week or two helps keep odors under control. Some synthetic turf products are designed with drainage holes that let urine pass through, but the infill still needs to be flushed periodically. I tell my clients to treat it like an outdoor carpet rather than a real lawn. A little attention every month keeps it looking fresh for a decade or more.

When Artificial Grass Makes Sense

Not every yard needs artificial grass. If you have a shaded backyard in a mild climate, real grass might be the better choice. But for a sunny California yard where water is expensive and shade is scarce, a low-maintenance lawn made from synthetic turf is hard to beat. It also works well for commercial landscapes like office parks, apartment courtyards, and dog runs where consistent green matters more than seasonal variation.

I have installed artificial grass on roofs, on sloped hillsides, and in tight courtyards where a mower would never fit. The key is treating each site on its own terms. A paver installation next to the turf needs to be planned together, not as separate projects. If the paver edging is too low, the infill from the turf will wash onto the pavers and make them look dirty. If the paver base is higher than the turf base, water will pool at the transition. A good landscaping company will coordinate the two so the whole yard works as one system.

Choosing the Right Synthetic Turf

There are dozens of brands and styles of artificial grass, and the differences matter. Some turf has a longer pile height that looks lush but mats down easily in high-traffic areas. Other turf has a shorter, denser fiber that holds up better to dogs and kids. For a residential lawn, I usually recommend a mid-range product with a mix of green and olive tones. The variegated color looks more natural than a uniform bright green, and it shows less wear over time.

For commercial landscape applications, durability is the priority. A turf with a heavier face weight and a polypropylene backing will last longer under constant foot traffic. The backing also affects drainage. Some products have a solid backing that requires perforations for water to pass through, while others have a porous backing that drains naturally. I prefer the porous type for most installations because it simplifies the drainage base design.



artificial grass installation

Final Thoughts on Artificial Grass Installation

If you are planning an artificial grass installation for your own yard or a commercial property, take the time to do the groundwork right. Use a drainage base of decomposed granite, install a

weed barrier, secure the edges with proper perimeter edging, and spend the effort on clean seams. The infill and power broom work may feel tedious, but they are what turn a flat green carpet into a lawn that actually looks good from ten feet away.

I have seen too many jobs where the homeowner tried to save a few hundred dollars by skipping the base prep or using cheap seam tape. Those jobs almost always end up costing more in the long run. A well-done artificial grass installation, with the right materials and a methodical approach, will look good for fifteen years or more with very little artificial grass maintenance. That is the payoff for doing it right the first time.