

What to Expect During Artificial Turf Installation: A Practical Guide

I have been installing synthetic lawns for over fifteen years now, and I still remember the first time a homeowner asked me if artificial grass would feel like a putting green. The short answer was yes, but only if you get the base right. That is the part most people overlook. They see the finished surface and think it is all about the grass itself, but the real work happens underneath. A proper artificial turf installation starts with understanding what lives beneath your feet, and that is where experience separates a job that lasts from one that needs replacing in two seasons.

When I started out in Pleasanton, I worked for a company called O'Neill's Green Services. They taught me that every synthetic lawn tells a story about its foundation. If the drainage base is wrong, you get puddles. If the weed barrier is cheap, you get sprouts pushing through the seams. And if you skip the geotextile fabric under the crushed gravel base, you might as well lay your turf on mud. These details matter, and they are the difference between a lawn that looks good for a year and one that looks good for a decade.



The Groundwork You Cannot Skip

Every [artificial turf installation](#) begins with excavation. You need to strip away the existing grass and topsoil to a depth of about three to four inches. That might sound like a lot, but you are making room for the base layers that give the turf its shape and stability. I have seen people try to save time by just laying turf over their old lawn, and it never works. The old grass rots, the ground settles unevenly, and within months you have a bumpy surface that feels nothing like a real putting green.

Once the dirt is out, you bring in the crushed gravel base. This is not the same gravel you use for a driveway. It needs to be angular, not round, so it locks together under pressure. A vibratory plate compactor is the tool for this job. You run it over the gravel in passes, wetting the material slightly to help it settle. I always check the grade with a long level. A quarter inch of slope per foot is usually enough to carry water away from the house. Too flat and you get standing water. Too steep and the turf starts to shift over time.

On top of the compacted gravel goes a layer of geotextile fabric. This is the weed barrier that keeps unwanted plants from pushing up through your synthetic lawn. Some installers skip this step to save a few dollars, but I have never regretted using it. The fabric also helps separate the gravel from the sand or infill materials above, which keeps the whole system from mixing together and losing its drainage capacity.

Choosing the Right Turf for Your Site

Not all artificial grass is the same. If you have dogs, you want a pet turf with a permeable backing that lets urine drain through instead of pooling on the surface. Pet turf also has a shorter pile height and tighter stitch pattern, which makes it easier to rinse clean with a hose. For a putting green, you want a longer blade with a thatch layer that holds the ball up. I have installed putting greens where the homeowner wanted a specific roll and lie, and that meant ordering turf with a directional grain. You cannot fake that with a standard lawn product.

For most residential yards, a mid-range synthetic lawn with a blend of tan and green blades looks the most natural. The cheaper stuff is too shiny and too uniform. It screams fake from the street. The high-end turf has a matte finish and a mix of blade shapes that mimic real fescue or Bermuda grass. That is what you want if curb appeal matters.

The Installation Process Itself

When the base is ready and the turf has been delivered, the real work begins. You roll out the artificial grass and let it sit in the sun for an hour or two. Heat helps relax the material so it lies

flat. Then you cut the pieces with a turf cutter, which is basically a heavy utility knife with a hooked blade. You want a clean edge because every seam is a potential weak point.

Seams are joined using turf seaming tape and turf adhesive. You lay the tape sticky side up, brush on the adhesive, and press the edges together. A landscape stapler helps hold the seam while the glue sets. I always put staples every two inches along the seam and then cover them with a thin layer of silica sand infill to hide the line. If the seam is in a high-traffic area, I might add a second row of staples. No one wants to see a crack open up in the middle of their lawn six months later.

Around the edges, you secure the turf with turf edging. This is a flexible metal or plastic strip that holds the perimeter down and keeps the grass from curling up. Some installers just staple the edges into the ground, but that works loose over time. Edging gives a finished look and makes mowing around the lawn easier if you have real grass adjacent.

Infill and Finishing Touches

After the turf is down and fastened, you spread infill materials across the surface. Silica sand infill is the most common choice. You broadcast it with a spreader and then brush it into the blades with a power broom. The sand weighs down the turf, holds the fibers upright, and protects the backing from UV damage. On a pet turf installation, I use a different infill that resists odors and breaks down urine. There are also acrylic-coated sands that reflect heat, which helps keep the surface cooler on hot days.

A power broom is not optional. You need it to work the sand down into the thatch. If you skip this step, the sand sits on top and the turf feels gritty underfoot. It also shifts around and makes a mess. I have used a stiff push broom in a pinch, but it takes three times as long and never gets the sand as deep.

Once the infill is in place, you give the whole lawn a final rinse with a hose. This settles the dust and helps the sand lock in. Then you walk the entire surface, checking for loose seams, exposed staples, or low spots where water might collect.

Maintenance That Extends the Life

A well-done artificial turf installation can last fifteen years with basic care. You need to rinse the lawn occasionally, especially if you have pets. An artificial grass cleaner sprayed on and rinsed off keeps smells down. You also need to brush the fibers now and then to keep them from matting. A leaf blower works for debris, but a stiff broom does a better job of fluffing the pile.

One thing I always tell homeowners is to watch for compaction in high-traffic paths. If you see the fibers starting to lay flat, rake them up with a plastic rake or a broom. The silica sand infill will eventually settle and need topping off. You can buy bags of infill at any landscape supply store. Adding a fresh layer every couple of years keeps the turf looking new.

When to Call a Professional

Some people try to save money by doing their own artificial turf installation. I get it. But the tools alone cost a fair amount, and the learning curve is steep. A vibratory plate compactor is not something you use every weekend. A turf cutter takes practice to cut straight. And if you mess up the base, the whole lawn is compromised. I have seen DIY jobs where the turf bubbles up because the crushed gravel base was not compacted evenly. That kind of mistake is hard to fix without starting over.

If you have a small area, like a patch of pet turf in a backyard corner, you might be fine doing it yourself. But for a full front yard or a putting green, it pays to hire someone who has done it before. The cost of the installation is mostly labor anyway, and the materials are the same whether you do it or a pro does it. Paying for experience saves you from paying twice.

One last thing: always check the drainage base before the turf goes down. Pour a bucket of water on the gravel and see if it drains within a few minutes. If it pools, your grade is off. Fix it now, because once the turf is glued and stapled, you are not going to want to lift it.

Artificial turf installation is not a weekend project for the faint of heart. But when it is done right, the result is a low-maintenance, durable synthetic lawn that looks good year-round. Whether you want a putting green in your backyard or a pet turf that survives muddy paws, the principles are the same. Good base, good seams, good infill. Everything else is details.