

Alternatives to Lawns

Choosing What's Right for You

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Three busloads of European garden center owners toured America's mid-Atlantic region a few years ago, and what stood out to them most was how turfgrass dominates our home landscapes.

We're so blessed here by plentiful land, they observed, so why are we "wasting" it by planting huge swaths of one rather plain plant — turfgrass — dotted with a few trees here and there?

It's a question more mower-weary American homeowners are beginning to ask, too.

Lawns have their place, to be sure.

"The installation cost is cheap, they make good play areas, and they're what we're used to," says Joseph Ascenzi, a Pennsylvania Certified Horticulturalist and owner of Laurel Hill Gardens in Philadelphia.

In the days before power mowers, lawns were even a status symbol — a green badge that showed you were well off enough to afford luxury over food production or untamed land.

Fast-food Landscapes

But Ascenzi says our yards these days are lawn-dominated not so much by conscious choice as by default. He believes homeowners should consider alternatives and "look at areas of their yards that don't have to be turf. Some areas can be converted to things like butterfly gardens, paths, woodlands and groundcovers."

More homeowners are doing just that, he says, "and we're finding that people are

happy to get rid of their lawn mowers."

Nancy Beaubaire, director of communications for Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve in New Hope, Pa., is seeing the same thing. She's a good example herself. Starting with a typical lawn-dominant yard in suburban Bucks County, Beaubaire pared down the grass to curving green pathways that wind through island and border beds of mostly native shrubs and groundcovers.

She believes two timely issues are driving our rethinking of the Great American Lawn — the environment and wildlife.

"A lawn requires so many resources to keep it looking good ... water, bug killers, herbicides, fuel to keep it cut," she says. "When you have to put out little flags that say to keep off the lawn for three days after applying something, you realize that can't be too great for the environment."

Runoff from lawns is a significant contributor to water pollution, says Rebecca Wertime, project coordinator for the Pennsylvania office of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay. Unlike farms and factories, this runoff is unregulated.

"No one comes in and tells you that you can't do this or that," she says. "Homeowners like instant effect. They like to put this stuff down and not have any bugs or weeds. But what impact is that having off the property?"

As more and more natural areas are converted into housing developments, concern also is increasing about what that means to wildlife that depended on the destroyed native vegetation.

"Lawns offer no habitat at all for butterflies, birds and most other wildlife," says Beaubaire.

Neither does a lawn-dominated landscape give a "sense of place," she adds. In other words, a rolling green lawn here looks pretty much like a rolling green lawn in Illinois or Oregon.

"It's like the fast food of the landscape world," Beaubaire says.

One of the main factors preventing more people from shrinking their lawn space in favor of more earth-friendly, more wildlife-friendly plantings is neighborhood expectations.

"A tidy front yard with a well-trimmed lawn has come to symbolize what it means to be a good neighbor," says Beaubaire. "It's a very strong aesthetic."

Less Lawn, Less Time, Less Money

Another factor is the perception that lawn is the lowest-maintenance way to deal with yard space. Although a lawn is less expensive to install than garden or groundcover beds, the ongoing care usually makes it more expensive in the long run, says Ascenzi.

"You have to look at the long-term cost and the value that beds add to the house," he says. "Beds might be more expensive to install, but they're less maintenance in the long term."

That's exactly what Beaubaire found as she converted her lawn to mixed gardens.

"Getting it established requires some work," she says. "The first year that I put in my plantings was a dry year, and I had to make sure the new plants were getting an inch of water per week. I also had to keep it weeded. But after that, the perennials began to fill the space. Now the main ongoing maintenance is to mulch once a year and occasionally divide some of the things. I don't use any supplemental fertilizer, and I have one cutback a year instead of mowing every week.

"It really doesn't take much work, although it looks like it must because it looks so pretty. If you really sat down and figured out how much work this takes compared to a lawn, this takes less. And that's without even considering the environmental benefits. This way saves time and money, and it's a lot more beautiful and interesting than a lawn."

A good place to start, Beaubaire says, is to ask yourself, "How much lawn do I really need?"

"Do you play badminton or need a place for the kids to play? Think about that and then reduce the lawn to what you need," she suggests. "If you entertain, for example, maybe you could convert some of the space to a deck or a patio."

Frances Hopkins, who founded the Oregon-based line of lawn-alternative Stepables plants, says it's also important to think about how you want to use the yard and how you want it to look.

"Do you want an ornamental front yard or a functional front yard?" she asks. "Do you want to play catch on it, or are you just going to look at it?"

The answers to those questions will guide issues such as how much grass you give up, where new beds will go and what plants will go in them.

Once you realize that plants other than grass aren't limited to just around the house, the door opens to literally hundreds of alternatives. As with any plant, the goal is choosing plants that match the site (light, moisture levels, soil type, wind exposure, etc.) and that fit your preferences.

One Man's Meadow is Another Man's Weeds

The best known "lawn alternative" is the wildflower meadow. This involves replacing turfgrass with a blend of taller grasses such as switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), bluestem (*Andropogon*) or Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and with several species of low-maintenance perennials, such as black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia hirta*), purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*) and blazing star (*Liatris spicata*).

In two to three years, these fill in and make a colorful, low-maintenance planting that provides plenty of shelter, seeds and pollen for wildlife. Larger meadows like this make the most sense on larger properties in more rural settings.

Be aware that not everyone likes this look, which can be described as "beautifully natural" or a "wild-looking mess," depending on your point of view. Some municipalities have weed ordinances that limit the height of plantings. Neighbors who prefer a neater look or who are concerned about wildflowers seeding onto their property may claim that your wildflower planting violates the local ordinance.

One way to head off trouble is to check into local ordinances and make neighbors aware of what you plan to do before getting started.

"What is one person's dream can be another's nightmare," says Hopkins.

In more populated areas, beds of naturalistic mixed plantings blend in much better than traditional meadows. This is the approach Beaubaire used, combining shrubs with perennials and groundcovers in beds divided by curving paths of lawns. Occasionally edging the beds makes it look even neater.

"The plants might be exactly the same ones you'd use in a meadow," she says, "but you can make it look more controlled if you plant in a designed, managed way. So even though it still has that natural feel, it doesn't look like it's run amok."

If you add features such as paved sitting areas, bird baths and water gardens, the result is even more of a garden look than a meadow. Using trees and shrubs in the mix also is more familiar and acceptable to neighbors — plus woody plants take even less care than perennial flowers.

Groundcovers

Another option is replacing sections of lawn with other low-growing groundcovers.

Hopkins' Under a Foot Plant Co. offers 137 species in its Stepables line that's now sold in many garden centers or online at <http://www.stepables.com/>. That site allows customers to zero in on the best choices by selecting variables such as light requirements, bloom color, height, growth rate and ability to withstand foot traffic.

Some of these groundcovers are tough enough to take foot traffic several times a day or to thrive among stepping stones. Some of Hopkins' favorites are blue star creeper (*Isotoma fluviatilis*), which gets dainty star-shaped light-blue flowers in spring summer; creeping mazus (*Mazus reptans*), which is nearly covered by white or purple flowers in mid-spring, and creeping thyme 'Elfin' (*Thymus serpyllum*), a particularly tough and drought-tolerant mat-former with a nice scent.

Hopkins, who doesn't even own a lawn mower anymore, says her main yard jobs now are raking leaves off the groundcover beds once in fall and a "general weeding in spring. You have to get the new [weed] seedlings out. That's the biggest job, because if you let them go to seed, then you'll have 10 times that amount."

As groundcover beds spread and thicken, weeds become less and less of a problem, she adds.

"I rarely fertilize my plants, and they do fine," Hopkins says.

Her advice is to do what most Stepables customers do: start with two or three types, plant a patch of each, then see how it goes. Most people find it works so well that they either expand their plantings or branch out into even more species, Hopkins says.

Beaubaire also advises starting small.

"You don't have to take up the whole lawn and be faced with a big patch of bare ground," she says.

Beaubaire admits to fearing that she overdid it at first.

"At one point early on I had a moment of panic where I thought, 'What have I done!'" she says. "But once I started planting, that changed to, 'I need more room.'"

Installing and Maintaining Your Lawn Alternative

To convert a lawn to a meadow, garden or groundcover planting, first eliminate the grass.

This can be done by:

1. Stripping it off with a shovel or rented sod-cutter.
2. Smothering the grass for at least two to three months and tilling in the dead material. (Black plastic, plywood or sections of newspaper topped with mulch all are good "smotherers.")
3. Or kill the grass with a nonselective herbicide spray such as glyphosate (i.e., Roundup) and till in the dead material after it's browned.

Next, lightly till or dig the bare ground, then plant or seed. If using transplants instead of seed, mulch the bed with 2 to 3 inches of bark mulch to hold down weeds and retain moisture. Keep the bed consistently damp through the first season until the plants have established.

In meadows, mow or weed-whack all herbaceous plants every six weeks for the first season to a height of 4 to 6 inches — primarily to keep annual weeds from going to seed. Expect to see a lot of weeds the first year because you've stirred buried weed seeds to the surface by tilling, but realize that the annual weeds will die off at season's end.

Pull or spot-spray weeds the second and ensuing years to clear space for your perennials and grasses to fill in. Cut or burn (if allowed) meadow plants to the ground once a year at the end of winter or early spring before new growth begins.

In mixed gardens and groundcover beds, mulch bare spots between the plants and pull or spot-spray weeds as they appear — definitely before they go to seed. Since you won't be tilling this bed after the initial planting, weed problems will lessen as the plants fill in.

Low-growing, perennial lawn alternatives for sunny areas:

Alpine speedwell (*Veronica allionii*)
Blue star creeper (*Isotoma fluviatilis*)
Candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*)
Catmint 'Walker's Low' (*Nepeta x fassenii*)
Creeping cinquefoil (*Potentilla neumanniana* 'Nana')
Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*)
Creeping sedum (*Sedum spurium*)
Creeping thyme (*Thymus praecox*)
Fleabane (*Erigeron scopulinus*)
Golden creeping speedwell (*Veronica repens* 'Sunshine')
Golden ragwort (*Senecio aureus*)
Hardy ice plant (*Delosperma cooperi*)
Lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*)
Leadwort (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*)
Mountain rock cress (*Arabis sturrii*)
Oregano (*Origanum*)
Pinks (*Dianthus gratianopolitanus*)
Pussytoes (*Antennaria carpatica*)
Rock rose (*Helianthemum nummularium*)
Snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*)

Thrift (*Armeria maritima*)
Thyme 'Elfin' (*Thymus serpyllum*)

Low-growing, perennial lawn alternatives for shadier areas:

Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*)
Barren strawberry (*Waldsteinia fragarioides*)
Barrenwort (*Epimedium*)
Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)
Brass buttons (*Leptinella squalida*)
Bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*)
Carpathian bellflowers (*Campanula carpatica*)
Chinese astilbe 'Pumila' (*Astilbe chinensis*)
Christmas fern (*Polystichum achrostichoides*)
Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
Coralbells (*Heuchera*)
Creeping jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*)
Creeping mazus (*Mazus reptans*)
Crested iris (*Iris cristata*)
Evergreen shield fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*)
False Solomon's seal (*Maianthemum racemosum*)
Foamflowers (*Tiarella cordifolia*)
Foamybells (*Heucherella*)
Fringe-leaf bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia*)
Goldenstar (*Chrysogonum virginianum*)
Japanese forestgrass (*Hakonechloa macra*)
Japanese pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*)
Lamium (*Lamium maculatum*)
Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*)
Lilyturf (*Liriope muscari*)
Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*)
Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*)
Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*)
Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pennsylvanicum*)
Shooting star (*Dodecatheon meadia*)
Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum commutatum*)

Sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*)
Variegated Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* 'Variegatum')
Wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*)

Good perennial choices for a sunny meadow:

Beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*)
Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardi*)
Black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia hirta* or *R. fulgida*)
Blanket flower (*Gaillardia*)
Blazing star (*Liatris spicata*)
Blue anise hyssop (*Agastache* 'Blue Fortune')
Bluestar (*Amsonia montana* or *A. hubrichtii*)
Boltonia (*Boltonia asteroides*)
Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Calico aster (*Aster lateriflorus*)
Cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)
Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*)
Goldenrod (*Solidago*)
Hardy geranium (*Geranium maculatum*)
Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)
Joe-Pye weed (*Eupatorium maculatum*)
Meadow rue (*Thalictrum pubescens*)
New England aster (*Aster novae-angliae*)
Northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*)
Oxeye sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*)
Purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*)
Prairie coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*)
Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)
Queen-of-the-prairie (*Filipendula rubra*)
Sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*)
Swamp sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*)
Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)
Tickseed (*Coreopsis verticillata*)
Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)
Wild indigo (*Baptisia*)