

# Reduce Your Lawn

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## The Lawn Goodbye

Mother Nature is not neat, so why do we employ the noisy buzz of blowers and mowers to make our front garden an immaculate sterile zone? Front lawns with clipped shrubs and pruned trees neither create a warm welcome, nor provide a natural harbor. They are no more than a barrier between public and the private zones. What is this space for? Perhaps this zone of grass/shrub/tree invokes a primal reminder of time spent in the African savannah. Or is it perhaps to imitate the historical commons of New England estates? Certainly it echoes back to the hopefulness of Levittown, Long Island, following WW II.

Honestly, why do we have a token lawn/shrub/tree front yard?

Like me you probably have a small variation on the typical “I have a space to waste” front lawn. My front lawn is punctuated with a scattering of evergreen trees my husband planted, and boulders the contractor left. A generous description would be a “European miniature estate” look. After fertilizer, pesticide, herbicide, top dressing, a bag or two of seed and a few rolls of sod for repairs, I do not have a lush green lawn. Instead, I have areas of buttercups, moss and brown grass within the lawn that I battle, then train my eye to ignore.

For this I paid the chemical industry well and practiced the mantra of “If a little is good, a lot is better” with their products. I’ve probably added to the march of pollutants into my drinking water and hurt numerous generations of beneficial insects, just to maintain a grassy monoculture barrier.

Sadly, my front lawn is the one garden area that does not mark the passage of seasons. Neither can I pick my lawn and pop it into a vase, nor eat it. Even visiting dogs ignore it and no one in the family lingers there. It is a time consuming green space. It is pointless.

So what to do?

## Beyond Monoculture

Aim to create a diverse natural environment with a sustainable native plant garden that celebrates each season, maintained without a mower or a blower. Attract life back into this sterile zone. Draw plans that include tall plants (structural elements) with shrubs and flowers that can be clustered in drifts. Consider a focal point - the place where the eye lingers. It can be anything: a water feature, a sculpture, even a found object. Hedges are

useful for both full and partial visual barriers. A hedge of yew or laurel creates a high, permanent visual privacy barrier, and some noise protection. Low-growing boxwood, rosemary and even sage or compact foliaged plants form hedges adding a lovely dimension of formality by dividing space within the garden.

Check carefully that your plant list correlates to your current hardiness zone, along with the amounts of shade and wetness in your yard. The right plant in the right place can be enjoyed for years, with little fuss.

Plan for each season, but especially for winter. Foliage variety is important for our long, gray days. Consider low evergreens planted with flowering heathers, thyme, wintergreen (Gaultheria), periwinkle (Vinca minor), and kinnikinnick, with dogwood, ninebark and blueberry are great additions for colorful wood. In the Northwest, spring can start with flowering witch hazel (Hamamelis vernalis) in January. Bulbs are good bursts of color. Consider native plants to reduce summer watering. It wouldn't be fall without purple Asters, coneflowers (Echinacea purpurea), and Black-Eyed Susan (Rudbeckia hirta). Keep drooping seed heads and berries for fall and winter beauty, and as forage for birds.



A lawnless yard, designed and installed by Linda Chalker-Scott, mingles enticing colors and textures at her home. **Photo by Linda Chalker-Scott / WSU Puyallup Extension**

### **A Kaleidoscope of Colors**

Imitating many Europeans, I wander through my neighborhood and visit public demonstration gardens to gather plant ideas. You can also enjoy translating color into plant lists and perusing plant catalogs, books and magazines. Superb photographs in the “The Well Designed Mixed Garden” demonstrate plant combinations (see Resources.)

Color and plant combinations are important. Various harmonies of one color, (monochromatic) are appealing in a small space, but drifts of rainbow (polychromatic) color are more suited for a large space. There are exceptions, though. I have seen many small gardens mixing bright and pastel rainbow-colored flowers with wonderful effect. Pale colors stand out in shade and in evening light, while bright hot colors tend to fade in bright summer sun and yellow can be blinding. I have seen stunning combinations of complementary color schemes using opposing colors such as orange/blue, yellow/violet and my favorite orange/purple. You can mix-and-match monochromatic with a dash of complementary color, for example blue-violet, blue, and blue-green, with a hint of orange.

### **Less Lawn, One Step at a Time**

Replacing a lawn takes time and work, but is easier if done in stages:

- Incrementally remove lawn around existing trees and shrubs, replace with native plants.
- Create new beds that either surround your lawn with trees, shrubs and flowers, or migrate across your lawn.
- Fertilize and mulch as you plant.
- Don't throw away sod: turn it over, place at the bottom of a two-spade-deep trench, and fill with soil and compost.
- "Lasagna Mulching" - put a layer of cardboard over the grass, then add at least six inches of soil and compost. Not only will this kill the lawn underneath, it is a great technique if you want varying heights in your new garden.

Researchers at Mississippi State University note that a fifty- by fifty-foot lawn absorbs gaseous pollutants, prevents soil erosion, filters contaminants from rainwater and reduces water runoff. But an area of trees, shrubs, and flowers achieves this too. In addition, it will be shared and enjoyed by birds, bugs, and human visitors. Which will you choose?

### **RESOURCES:**

- The Well Designed Mixed Garden, Tracy Disabato-Aust, Timber Press, 2003
- Front Yard Gardens- Growing More than Grass, Liz Primean, 2nd edition, 2010, Firefly Books Ltd.
- "Create Vegetable Beds with Lasagna Mulching," Judy Scott, Oregon State University Extension Service: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/create-vegetable-beds-lasagna-mulching>