

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Americans weed, water, mow, fertilize, de-thatch and spray an estimated twenty-four million acres of lawn, not including public parks, cemeteries, golf courses and highway plantings. While front-yard gardens without grass are the norm in some places like Holland, they are still relatively rare in the U.S. If you are one of those people who do not relish the thought of spending part of your weekend behind a noisy lawnmower, you are not alone. There is even a name for this movement. A "Freedom Lawn" is defined as "residential land permitted to or designed to contain a variety of plants other than manicured grass, especially when containing plant life that occurs without cultivation, chemicals, or cutting."

A few of the downsides of our typical monoculture grass lawn are 1) a need for great amounts of water, 2) grass clippings becoming a source of solid and hazardous waste, and 3) pesticide and fertilizer pollution. The simplest approach to a Freedom Lawn is to choose a grass variety that needs minimum care. "Bent grass has the lowest fertility requirement of any grass we grow [in the Northwest]," says Tom Cook, turf breeder at Oregon State University in Corvallis. "Even without fertilizer, it will produce color 10 months of the year." You can also add variety to your lawn seed mixture, with greens and herbs appropriate for the Northwest growing zone. Pro-Time Fleur de Lawn was developed with Oregon State University and includes English daisies, strawberry clover, yarrow and Baby Blue-eyes along with perennial ryegrass.

You may choose to shrink your lawn by replacing one corner at a time with other plantings or rockwork. After defining the area you will replace (it could be the worst section of your lawn, or the corner you see the most), smother the lawn with 10 to 12 sheets of newspaper, anchored down with six to ten inches of wood chip mulch. It will take several months for the lawn underneath to be killed, so ideally you lay down the newspaper and chips in the fall, plan your plantings over the winter, then set out plants in spring or start your own seedlings and grow them to transplantable size to move in the summer. Choose plants that fit the growing conditions of the area to be planted. Think of foundation plantings, such as trees, shrubs and vines that unify your house with your yard. You may consider a new walkway, wall, small hills of earth or a fence as part of the design. Big rocks are also excellent accents. For a large bed, use rocks in groups of three, Japanese style.

Once you reduce the size of your lawn, you may find you like the idea of eliminating grass all together. There are a growing number of garden books with design ideas for front yard gardens without a blade of grass in sight. Alternative groundcovers include kinnikinick, bergenia, ajuga (bugleweed) and sweet woodruff. With more diversity in your planting, you may enjoy more birds, butterflies and other living creatures in your yard. In addition, you may be able to hear those birds and crickets without the growl of the lawnmower in your ears.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
