



Naturalizing a Landscape Preparing a Grassy Area for Planting

NATURALIZING AN AREA UNDER A TREE (OR TWO)

If you struggle to keep the grass (or anything!) growing underneath a large tree in your yard, consider “naturalizing” the area. Simply put, naturalizing means using nature as a model to create an attractive area that doesn’t require a lot of fuss on your part to keep it that way.

In nature, turf grass doesn’t grow under trees. Think about taking a walk in the woods. What grows at ground level? Small shrubs, Ferns, Wildflowers, a few bunchgrasses: Any or all of these plants may be there, depending on the amount of light that reaches them. Shade tolerant plants are recommended when naturalizing an area under trees.

NATURALIZING A LAWN AREA

To some, a lawn is their yard’s crowning glory. To others, it’s a big hit on the pocketbook and the environment. Why would you choose to eliminate your lawn? There are good reasons including the environmental impact of lawn care and the time and money you spend maintaining the lawn.

Yale University has estimated that the United States uses more than 600 million gallons of gas to mow and trim lawns each year – about two gallons of gas for every man, woman and child, or five gallons per household. Mowers also consume engine oil in their crankcases, and two-stroke mowers consume oil in their fuel. One hour of running a typical 3.5 horsepower power mower creates as much air pollution as driving a car 350 miles.¹ The average lawn is mowed one to two times a week during its active growing period. That can add up to 64 hours a year just to keep the lawn mown. Alternative lawns may need to be mowed only once a year or not at all.

The average lawn is saturated with ten times the quantity of chemical pesticides per acre than our commercial farmlands. Excess fertilizer leaches into our streams.

Traditional lawns require more water than alternatives and most homeowners over water their lawns. Replacing the lawn with an alternative reduces water usage dramatically. Think about the savings on your water bill.

Here’s an easy approach to naturalizing a portion of a yard with one or more large trees in it:

1. Pick an area under a tree or between two trees. Use a garden hose or long rope to delineate the area where you want to replace grass with shade- and drought-tolerant shrubs, perennials and mulch.

¹ <http://www.cleanairyardcare.ca/sustainability/environmental-facts/>

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2. Measure the area and make a rough sketch on paper. Decide how many shrubs or plants are needed to fill that area when they are mature. (It may be just a few, depending on the size of plants at maturity.)
3. Remove the grass inside your “naturalized area” by using one of the three methods listed below
4. When you are sure grass is completely dead (depending on the grass-killing method you used) purchase and set potted plants out using these guidelines:
 - Place plants where they will be able to grow to their mature size without needing to be moved or pruned back every year.
 - Put shorter plants and those needing more light near the edge of the naturalized area.
5. Step back and view the area from several vantage points. Don’t forget to go inside and view the arrangement from a window if that is important to you. When you are satisfied with your arrangement, dig holes to set your plants in the ground. Use a very sharp shovel to minimize damage to tree roots. Cutting through roots an inch or less in diameter is not damaging to healthy trees. If a larger root is encountered, move plants to either side of it.
6. Keep this area mulched and watered regularly until the new plants are established.

Spend the next few seasons watching this naturalized area fill in, attract birds and look more interesting than the lawn you struggled to maintain.

Use the time you save not mowing under your tree to plan other naturalized areas.

THREE WAYS TO KILL LAWN GRASS for NEW PLANTING BEDS

1. **Back-breaking, difficult way:**

Rent a sod cutter or use a spade to cut out small patches of turf. Lift strips or chunks of sod and give them to someone who needs sod or place them upside down in a pile in an unused part of your property. Cover with black plastic and weight the plastic down with rocks. Wait a few years and it will turn into amazing topsoil.

2. **Non-chemical, easy, but long-term way:**

It is best to use this technique in late summer or fall so you can leave it alone and plant the following spring.

- Mark the area of turf you want to kill with a long rope or garden hose.
- Mow the area as short as possible.
- Cover the area completely with a layer of newspaper (about 6 sheets thick) or with cardboard. Overlap the edges of paper or cardboard about 12 inches so no grass can grow between them.
- Moisten the paper/cardboard to keep it in place
- Immediately cover the area with 3 inches of soil, compost, or a mixture of the two.
 - Bark mulch alone will not be heavy enough to keep the newspaper weighted down.

Do NOT plant into this area for several months. Any cuts or tears into the paper layers will let grass grow up through the covering and it will take over the new bed. Once grass has died, plant as described above.

3. **Quick, easy, chemical way:**

Herbicides are a surefire way to get rid of unwanted grass – if you're comfortable with chemicals. Chose an herbicide which is absorbed by the grass and roots, and doesn't have a soil residual. For current research-based recommendations, contact your local extension office.