



NATURALIZING A LANDSCAPE

Preparing a Grassy Area for Planting

More homeowners are looking for alternative ways to landscape their homes for a variety of reasons, including a concern for conserving water, the high cost and labor of maintaining a lawn, the repeated use of fertilizers and herbicides, and often to replace lawns just not doing well or dying under trees.

There are many alternatives to lawns, especially under trees where little sunlight reaches. One popular landscaping plan is called naturalizing, meaning the use of nature as a model to create an attractive area that doesn't require a lot of maintenance to keep it that way.

Turf grass doesn't grow under trees in nature. You may have observed what is growing at ground level when taking a walk in the woods. You see small shrubs, ferns, wildflowers, and a few grasses. Which plants are chosen depends on the amount of light that reaches them. Shade tolerant plants are recommended when naturalizing an area under trees. There are many plants to choose from, and visiting local nurseries is an enjoyable way to see what is available in your area.

Once you have decided to replace all or part of your lawn, then plan well how you are going to remove the lawn and condition the soil to accept your new plants. There are many excellent resources on soil amendment and plant suggestions on Washington State Extension sites, as well as on the internet in general.

NATURALIZING A LAWN AREA.

Here is an easy approach to naturalizing a portion of a yard with one or more large trees:

1. Use a garden hose or long rope to delineate the area in which you want to replace grass with shade- and drought-tolerant shrubs, perennials, and mulch.

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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 mature. (It may be just a few, depending on the size of plants at maturity.)
3. Remove the grass inside your “naturalized area.” There are several ways to remove grass from an area. The easiest and most recommended method to prevent the destruction of roots of trees is to cover the area with either paper, cardboard, or weed cloth. Next, cover these overlapped items with compost or mulch at a depth of 3-4 inches. Over time (several weeks) the grass will die and the area will be ready for planting. You don’t need to remove these cover materials, but dig your holes through them for planting when you are ready. It is best to do this in the fall, allowing the grass to die all winter, for planting in the spring. Other methods exist to remove grass. One is to dig up the grass and remove the sod from the area. This can be hard labor. Killing grass using chemical methods is not recommended. If you do choose this method, check all local rules for grass-killing chemicals to avoid damaging trees.
4. When the grass is completely dead (depending on the grass-killing method you used), purchase and set potted plants out using these guidelines:
 - a. Place plants where they can grow to their mature size without moving or pruning back every year.
 - b. Place 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 and attract birds, looking more interesting than the lawn you struggled to maintain in the past.