

Lawn Alternatives

Lawns have a long history in our culture. Memories of the savannahs in Africa and the safety they provided inspired Europeans to surround their estates with lawns. U.S. citizens who came to hear Lincoln give his second inaugural address stood ankle deep in the mud of the capital city. In reaction, landscape designers began to create lawns as a public vision for urban neighborhoods. As the industrial era progressed, lawn-mowing machines surfaced in seductive advertisements. Garden clubs, concerned with neighborhood values, promoted the clean, green expanse of lawn.

The postwar move to suburbia increased the landscape industry by leaps and bounds. With the advent of chemical prowess developed from the war industry, we had the tools we needed to maintain these pristine visions. Today there are over 30 million acres of lawn in the U.S.-the equivalent of the entire state of Alabama.

Why would you choose to eliminate your lawn? Two good reasons are the environmental impact of lawn care and the time and money you spend maintaining the lawn.

One hour of running a power mower creates as much air pollution as driving a car 350 miles. 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 mowed. 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. By planting lawn alternatives you can, in time, choke out weeds and eliminate your use of herbicides. By creating a diversity of plants and welcoming beneficial insects into your yard, you can also eliminate or reduce your use of pesticides. What will you do with all the time you save applying these chemicals? Won't you feel better about your children or pets playing on a chemical-free lawn?

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

The U.S. creates over 160 million tons of solid waste a year and much of that is grass clippings. Some homeowners do not compost or only compost part of their lawn waste. Grass clippings contaminated with herbicides or pesticides can do more damage than good to your compost. Removing your lawn may save you trips to the landfill.

Now you understand a few of the benefits to lawn alternatives. Where do you start? You don't have to rip up your entire lawn at once. Consider planting only partial areas at a time. Start with a curved area around one side of your grass. Add a new area each year until you have achieved the look you want. Some groundcovers will require one to two years to establish themselves and become sufficiently dense, so be patient.

Now comes the creative part-what to plant where? There are many options. You may want a perennial flower garden that blooms with each changing season, or a water feature that provides a relaxing area, or a thick carpet of Corsican mint that releases a pleasant scent with every footstep. Consider the areas in your yard you might want to brighten up or vary in height. Survey your view. Would replacing some of your lawn provide you with additional interest or privacy?

Eco-Lawn, developed by Oregon State University, is a good choice for sunny footpaths or play areas. Eco-Lawn includes English daisy, yarrow, strawberry clover, Roman chamomile and perennial rye grass. Once established it needs little summer water and, due to the clover, requires no supplemental fertilizer.

In a shady area where the lawn requires annual reseeding, consider planting violets that will reseed themselves and produce a lovely fragrance in the spring.

Slopes and rocky areas are difficult to mow but require plantings to prevent soil erosion. Therefore, they are a perfect candidate for groundcovers. Try Orchid Rockrose for an interesting gray-green foliage or kinnikinnick, which tolerates poor soil and provides good slope stabilization.

Boggy areas can be replaced with astilbe (a tall perennial with white, pink, and red flowers) or Dwarf Bulrush (a hardy perennial with brown fruiting heads).

To attract wildlife and beneficial insects, consider putting in an arrangement of northwest native flowering plants to create a meadow-lawn. Native plants are already adapted to survive the fluctuations in rainfall and temperature that are common in your area.

There are many benefits to lawn alternatives. Whether you choose an alternative for environmental, aesthetic, or practical reasons, the rewards are great.

Resources

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