

The American vision of England's picturesque landscape is a great expanse of green lawn. Of course, there is really nothing like the versatile lawn as a ground cover and play surface. But this idea was imported from cool, damp Great Britain, and many turf grasses do not grow well in our climatically diverse country. Hence, we must expend great effort and cost to maintain so much unusable, nonproductive land.

Since the limitless "greensward" design concept, originated by renowned landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted in noteworthy parks throughout the country, grass has been the conventional choice for our residential landscapes. In fact, homeowners spend an estimated 40 billion dollars per year on their lawns; in watering, fertilizing, applying pesticides, and mowing, all to maintain an unnatural monoculture. A small, 1,000-square-foot lawn could require as much as 20,000 gallons of water per year to be green. It is estimated that more than 50% of residential and commercial irrigation water use goes to waste due to evaporation, wind, over watering, and poor system design. In the Southwest, where costs for water can become prohibitive, many people are replacing lawn with Astroturf. This artificial covering not only blocks the flow of natural elements between Earth and sky but also heats up so much that it can burn children and pets.

As concerned gardeners, we can take steps to minimize the overuse and non-sustainable consequences of the American lawn: water wastage; groundwater, river, and ocean pollution; and sterile habitats that harbor disease and insect pests. The artificial environment created by great expanses of grass discourages native diversity and wildlife, while the use of fossil-fuel powered machinery for maintenance causes pollution and further oil dependence. Possibly the most dangerous effect of the myriad pesticides used is risk posed to the health of children and animals. Our choice to stop using pesticides will benefit people, pets, and wildlife in the community.

As a first step to downsizing, rethink the meaning of the word "weed." Simply allow a part of your backyard to revert to nature; let whatever chooses to seed itself take over. To prevent succession of trees and shrubs, this area can eventually be mowed, preferably with a manual mower. Native plants use less natural resources and attract wildlife. The potential of this type of mixed planting is enormous for wildlife and plant conservation and has been dubbed the "freedom lawn." This small action will reduce the need for water and chemicals.

A second step is to convert some lawn space into a more productive vegetable/herb garden using only organic fertilizers and mulches. An edible and/or native wildflower garden is a desirable and useful alternative to all grass.

Remember, any grass areas that remain depend upon site characteristics such as shade tolerance, drought tolerance, and maintenance requirements. Choose the appropriate lawn

grasses: a good mix for full sun and medium maintenance contains mostly Kentucky bluegrass blends mixed with fine fescues and perennial ryegrasses. A 100% fine fescue blend works best in shady areas.

The possibilities for good landscape design combinations are endless when you use ground covers, ferns, evergreens, and ornamental grasses in addition to or instead of lawn. Even some “hardscape” elements such as gravel or mulch surfaces and paving stones offer good design solutions

The following low-maintenance plants not only make a beautiful visual statement but also keep weed growth in check:

*Adiantum pedatum* - maidenhair fern  
*Ajuga reptans* - bugleweed  
*Alchemilla mollis* - Lady's mantle  
*Asarum canadense* - wild ginger  
*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides* - dwarf plumbago  
*Convallaria majalis* - lily of the valley  
*Coreopsis verticillata* - coreopsis  
*Epimedium* spp. - barrenwort  
*Festuca ovina glauca* - blue fescue  
*Gallium odoratum* - sweet woodruff  
*Geranium sanguineum* - cranesbill  
*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' - golden hakonechloa  
*Hedera helix* - English ivy  
*Heuchera sanguinea* - coral bells  
*Juniperus conferta* - shore juniper  
*Lamium maculatum* - spotted dead nettle  
*Nepeta x faassenii* - catmint  
*Onoclea sensibilis* - sensitive fern  
*Orthopogon japonicum* - mondo grass  
*Pachysandra procumbens* - Allegheny pachysandra  
*P. terminalis* 'Variegata' - variegated Japanese spurge  
*Rudbeckia fulgida* 'Goldstrum' - Goldstrum coneflower  
*Sedum reflexum* - spruce-leaved sedum  
*S. spurium* - two-row stonecrop  
*Skimmia japonica* - Japanese skimmia  
*Vinca minor* - myrtle

Little by little, that hungry and thirsty green lawn can be whittled down to a more manageable size. Although it will take a shift in thinking because we have been conditioned to the idea of a well-manicured lawn for so long, we can ensure our down-sized lawns become more of an environmental asset than a liability.