



# Lawn or No Lawn?

**O**F ALL the things we can grow in our backyards, a lush, green lawn is probably the single most popular element, so ingrained in our sense of what makes a backyard respectable-looking that it transcends regionality and even practicality. For over 75 years, a backyard with a huge swath of lawn has been an integral part of the iconic American suburban lifestyle. When I began my career as a garden designer 15 years ago, it was the rare client who didn't request the inclusion of at least a modest-sized lawn in a backyard landscape design. Lately, the question of whether a garden plan should include a lawn at all comes up a lot more often.

Although lawns have their place in the landscape, more gardeners are choosing to forgo them in favor of more environmentally-friendly and less high-maintenance options.

BY SUSAN MORRISON

The expectation that a lawn should be an automatic component of a backyard is beginning to change. Recurring droughts in the Southeast and West have made homeowners much more selective as to where scarce water resources should be spent. Concerns for the impact on watershed health in the Northeast have also led communities to question the wisdom of using standard lawn-care chemicals. In the Midwest, a rediscovered appreciation of the biodiversity that occurs in native meadows has resulted in a shift in the definition of what a lawn can be. All these examples point to a growing national awareness that lawns—at least those grown from non-native

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Opposite page: Smaller lawns are a better fit for today's lifestyle. This lawn is appropriately scaled to the patio and surrounding garden. Above: In this no-lawn garden, sitting areas, colorful plantings, and garden art are connected by a winding gravel path.

species that require supplemental water and chemicals to sustain—are not always the best choice.

When your lot is modestly sized, a thoughtful approach to how much turf (if any) to include should be part of your planning process. If the goal is a design that maximizes impact, lawns by their very nature work against this effect. Traditional sod lawns eat up a disproportionate amount of real estate, crowding out the living spaces, structures, and ornamental spaces that bring a small garden to life.

That said, there are good reasons to keep some space devoted to lawn. Although there are other groundcovers that can handle foot traffic, it is hard to beat traditional, regularly maintained sod for many outdoor activities. If you have young children, including a patch of turf for play can be a smart lifestyle choice. Likewise, those with

dogs often want a place for their pets to exercise. Even so, before you opt for lawn, take time to think through how much you really need. In modest yards, lawns may be too small to be practical. If there isn't a stretch big enough for throwing a Frisbee or playing a game of tag, you might be better served using the neighborhood park for such activities and devoting the backyard to different kinds of creative play besides sports, such as a sandbox, playhouse, or play structure.

There are, however, a number of compelling reasons to consider eliminating—or at least downsizing—a backyard lawn. First among these is a desire to spend more time enjoying a garden and less time maintaining it. Ditching the weekly drudgery of lawn care is one of the easiest ways to make this happen. While trimming or weeding can be ignored for long stretches with no



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real damage done, skipping the tasks associated with regular lawn maintenance isn't an option. If a lawn is just being used as something pretty to look at, do you really need one at all? After all, that's real estate that could be used for growing vegetables, fitting in a quiet spot to read or relax, or adding more entertainment space. In general, lawns add an aesthetic quality that's perceived as nice to an average-sized backyard, but that's about it.

### DESIGN SOLUTIONS FOR REPLACING LAWN

One of the challenges of limiting or eliminating lawn in a backyard is figuring out exactly what to do with that space instead. If you know you want more patio space to accommodate additional seating or garden features, then it's a straightforward transaction of swapping lawn for hardscape. But if the goal is to create a more attractive and interactive aesthetic, suddenly all that newly liberated space can feel daunting.

As much as I applaud downsizing lawns for cultural and lifestyle reasons, from a design standpoint, a lawn does make it easier to come up with a pleasing layout. A large swath of lawn creates negative space, which acts as a resting place for the eye that keeps the overall design easy to read. In a traditional backyard, the lawn typically occupies center stage next to the patio, with planted areas and other garden elements orbiting around its edges. Because of this, it becomes the neutral connection that unites these different garden elements. If you exclude lawn in the new design, it is important to introduce a new unifier.

One solution is to borrow the concept of a stroll garden. Popular on English country estates in the 1800s, this design style is characterized by meandering gravel walks leading through an open park. Trees and shrubbery were planted in groupings to mimic nature—replacing the hedges, parterres, and straight lines that had been popular until then—while whimsical small structures and statues were placed artfully throughout to create stopping points of interest and contemplation. The goal was to blend the house into the surrounding countryside and to create a more enjoyable, relaxed way to interact with the outdoors than was possible with the more formal garden styles of preceding generations.



'Elfin' thyme fills in the spaces between flagstones in this meandering garden path.

Fortunately, you don't need a large estate to create your own version of a stroll garden. Introducing a series of winding, interconnected paths is an easy way to break up any amount of real estate into manageable garden plots. This makes selecting plants, planting, and maintaining each mini-garden much more manageable. Paths could be traditional gravel, concrete, flagstone, pavers, granite fines—even simple mulch. An advantage to gravel or mulch, however, is permeability. Because they allow water and air to percolate into the soil below, gravel and

mulch walkways can be widened or redirected easily to incorporate mature trees or large shrubs into a new design when overly enthusiastic roots do not allow for under-planting. Regardless of the paving you choose, consider material in a shade of gold or tan, which contrasts pleasantly with the planted areas. As long as you use a consistent material throughout, the pathways will perform the same visually unifying function as a lawn.

Be cautious of inadvertently creating too many intersecting pathways, however, which will result in a chaotic, crowded-

looking design. If, after laying out the new walkways, the resulting planting areas feel too large to comfortably maintain, consider adding what I think of as junior pathways. Instead of a path made from the same material as the major pathways, allow two or three broad steppingstones to twine a few feet into a bed. These will also simplify maintenance and encourage a closer inspection of the garden.

For the mini-gardens themselves, rather than planting flat and flush with paths, take advantage of the smaller garden beds by shaping garden soil into mounds. These mounds, often referred to as berms, are an excellent way to vary the topography even in a small space, a particularly appealing feature while the garden is still filling in and the plants are small and uniform. Man-made mounds will gradually compact and settle over time, so plan on building them up to a greater height than what you ultimately want to wind up with. Berms are most attractive when they have a free-form shape, so rather than mounding them into perfectly conical anthills, vary their width and height. They are also a practical way to reuse any excess soil from the pathway excavation—just be sure to amend the soil with compost if the native soil is dense clay or lacking in nutrients. Finally, berms are also an excellent way to improve drainage, a particularly important consideration in gardens with heavy clay soil.

An appealing aspect of this design as a replacement for lawn is the opportunity it makes for creative play. Curving pathways make great play spaces for games where children chase each other, and are certainly exciting highways for tricycles. For older children, why not give them their own garden bed, to plant and care for as they choose?

## NON-TRADITIONAL LAWNS

Perhaps you want to keep the functionality and the look of a lawn, but want to reduce maintenance chores or dependency on supplemental water and chemicals. Fortunately, homeowners nationwide have been moving toward more sustainable options, which has led to the introduction of a range of lawn choices appropriate for different parts of the country.

Not all lawn options perform equally, so before settling on one, take time to de-

## HIGH-PERFORMING LAWN ALTERNATIVE GROUNDCOVERS

Traditional turf grasses aren't the only options for achieving a lush sweep of manicured lawn. Though they can't handle the high foot traffic of sod, these ground covers offer some of the same advantages of turf grass, while using less water and providing more environmental benefits.



'Coastal Gem' grevillea

**'Coastal Gem' grevillea** (*Grevillea lanigera* 'Coastal Gem') USDA Zones 9–10

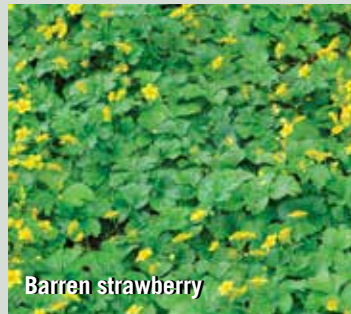
A low-growing, mounding shrub, this attractive groundcover sports grayish green, needlelike foliage that stays evergreen all year round. Bicolored flowers in shades of pink and white bloom almost continuously throughout the year.



Roman chamomile

**Roman chamomile** (*Chamaemelum nobile*) USDA Zones 4–9

The finely textured, rich green foliage of chamomile forms a solid mat and makes an excellent groundcover for a small area. Although its yellow flowers are inconspicuous, chamomile releases a heady herbal fragrance when stepped on or brushed against. Mow or shear occasionally.



Barren strawberry

**'Elfin' thyme** (*Thymus serpyllum* 'Elfin') USDA Zones 4–9

With small, closely spaced leaves and lilac-colored flowers that bloom in spring or summer, thyme is a classic choice for a mini lawn or between steppingstones. May become leggy if it receives less than five hours of sun a day.



Creeping raspberry

**Barren strawberry** (*Waldsteinia fragarioides*) USDA Zones 4–7

This ornamental strawberrylike plant makes an attractive, leafy, semi-evergreen groundcover. Cheerful yellow flowers appear in late spring. It does not tolerate heat and humidity, making it a good choice for more northern climates.

**Creeping raspberry** (*Rubus rolfiei*) USDA Zones 6–10

Forms a dense mat and is equally at home cascading over ledges or terraces. It produces insignificant white flowers in spring and occasionally fruits in summer. The real attraction, however, is the fall foliage: textured, thumbnail-sized leaves that begin a medium green and turn bright red to deep burgundy.

**'Catlin's Giant' carpet bugle** (*Ajuga reptans* 'Catlin's Giant') USDA Zones 3–9

A low, mounding form and shiny, bronze-tinted leaves make this a good option for adding contrast and texture to shady areas. In early spring, bright blue flowers are held on short spikes above the foliage. An excellent option for compacted soils near mature trees. Plants die back somewhat in cold weather, but return with vigor in spring.

—S.M.



termine what your performance requirements are. Questions to ask include:

- How much foot traffic must the lawn be able to handle?
- Is water conservation an issue?
- How much maintenance am I willing to do?

Despite their ubiquity, most commonly used turf grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass, zoysia, and tall fescues, are not native to any portion of the country, but in fact are European imports. For a long time, grass species like these were the only options available. Fortunately, in recent years growers and nurseries have developed native and ecological turf selections that are adapted for local growing conditions throughout North America. Traditional turf grass is usually a monoculture, meaning it is made up of a single type of plant. While this creates a uniform look, it also results in a lawn that performs well only in very specific situations. In contrast, ecological lawn alternatives are made up of a blend of native and adapted species. Mixed lawns like these are bred to perform better in specific regions of the country, and are designed to thrive on minimal supple-



**Top:** A blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) grass meadow lawn requires only a few inches of water a year, making it an excellent choice for this Arizona garden. **Above:** Grasslike species in different heights create more variety and interest than a single expanse of lawn.

mental irrigation and fertilization. For the most part, they do not appreciate regular mowing (although there are some exceptions), which means that while they can be walked on comfortably, they

shouldn't be mowed to the short, uniform height of a traditional lawn. While this makes them a poor choice for sports fields, their reduced maintenance requirements and regional appropriateness make them a smart choice for most backyard gardens.

Native and ecological lawns come the closest to replicating the look of a traditional lawn, but if all you are looking for is a swath of green that doesn't need to handle much foot traffic, numerous groundcover plants can work in place of grass. One challenge, however, is that they are generally only available for purchase in small sizes; most are sold as plugs or cell packs. Unlike traditional turf, which is either rolled out as sod for an instant lawn, or hydro-seeded for relatively fast results, groundcovers planted as individual plants can take months to years to completely fill in. This can make weeding a more regular chore than most of us like. For that reason, I recommend limiting the size of a groundcover lawn and opting for species that fill in more quickly.

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