

Alternatives to Grass Lawns

By Nancy Henderson and Robin Wilkerson

If you find yourself with acres of lawn, long after the swing set has been retired and the frisbee players have grown up and moved, there are some attractive options for reducing grass without losing views or a feeling of openness on your property.

For properties bordering woodlands, you might consider planting ferns, low bush blueberry, and other small woody shrubs such as fothergilla, azalea or leucothoe. This area could be kept mulched by using the leaves that fall on the remaining lawn area.

For a sunny area, consider a wildflower meadow that is mowed once a year. Cutting large perennial beds into a lawn area while leaving grass pathways is another option, though one clearly requiring more maintenance than lawn!

While both the native woodland border and meadow are not without some care and maintenance, they eliminate or reduce the need for mowing, and can be kept happy with the occasional application of compost.

Maintaining some lawn area around the house is valuable for providing a clean pathway, and for keeping ticks at bay, but hardscape can provide these functions as well. Informal stone terraces off of a kitchen or family room can be well used extensions of the home. A brick pathway leading from the formal front door to the secondary entrance might be widened for some seating and a garden or shrub border.

Other options for lawn substitutes

When I have any opportunity to plant new plants, in the interest of attempting to help restore ecology, I always choose native plants. There are non-native ground covers that aren't particularly invasive, but I am also looking for ways to help the local insects and birds in any way I can. That being said, I have seen a beautiful, mixed creeping thyme lawn in Lincoln. It took about 2 years of attentive weeding to get established, but looks beautiful now and requires no mowing. Thyme is not native but is a great bee plant.

Ground covers for sunny dry areas:

Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) prostrate, evergreen. Dainty pink flowers, brilliant red fruits. May be hard to establish; peat and sand seem to help.

Sweet fern (*Comptonia peregrina*). Fragrant, deciduous foliage, stoloniferous. Very tolerant. Hard to transplant. Not great winter interest.

Cliffbrake (*Paxistima canbyi*). To 15" – evergreen.

Threadleaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis verticillata*). Fine textured runner. Yellow fall foliage.

Moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*). 2" to 4". Mat forming, needle-like evergreen foliage. Needs good drainage.

Goldenstar (*Chrysogonum virginianum*). A rapid spreader in moist, acid soils. Yellow flowers. Semi-evergreen.

Fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatic 'Gro-low'*)- This is a spreading tough sub-shrub that will take some shade. About 8 to 12" high. Very striking fall foliage. Deer resistant.

Little bluestem grass (*Schizachrium scoparium*). Upright grass to 3' with fall color. Versatile and tough.

Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) - varieties – very pretty grass with lovely fall color.

Prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). A grass that will take some shade.

Sedges (*Carex* sp.) There are a variety of sedges that are wonderful lawn substitutes. Many will take shade, most benefit from a bit of sun. Garden in the Woods grows a beautiful lawn of *Carex pensylvanica*. Not ideal for croquet but in every other respect most worthy.

Ground covers for shady conditions:

American ginger (*Asarum canadense*) – not as evergreen as the European ginger but there are a lot of varieties that can provide a mixed texture of leaf forms.

Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*). This is the native alternative to the ubiquitous Japanese pachysandra. Not as evergreen but much flashier flowers, and a great plant for early pollinators.

Coast leucothoe (*Leucothoe axillaris*). Spreading, evergreen low growing shrub. Very tough. Deer don't touch.

Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*). A delicate creeper, evergreen, with very fragrant white flowers, persistent red fruit. Slow.

Yellowroot (*Xanthorhiza simplicissima*). 2' - 3' upright uniform growth habit, early flowering. Nice fall foliage. A serious spreader under the right conditions. Not for a mixed planting. A great plant.

White wood aster (*Aster divaricatus*). 18" - 24". Profuse summer flowering with handsome purple stems.

Hayscented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*). Lacy mid green fern with arching fronds. Aggressive. Nice under established shrubs. Excellent yellow fall color.

False Solomon's seal (*Smilacina racemosa*). Upright stems, ribbed leaves, terminal cluster of white flowers followed by interesting fruit display from summer to fall.

Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*). Evergreen maple shaped leaves , may have bronze winter color. White flowers in the spring. Humusy soil.

Ostrich fern (*Matteuccia pensylvanica*) is a fast to establish fern particularly in wet areas. I may dry out in the summer but its early aspect is always rich and impressive. Aggressive.

Mosses. Mosses make a beautiful ground cover in shady areas. Often will come in on its own.

The best book on the subject is: Native Ferns, Moss and Grasses, From Emerald Carpet to Amber Wave: Serene and Sensuous Plants for the Garden, by William Cullina.

Note: Plants I don't recommend because they have a thuggish tendency:

English ivy (*Hedera helix*)

Japanese pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*)

Wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortuneii*)