

## **Sustainable Gardening: First in a series of articles by members of the Lincoln Garden Club**

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### **'Sustainable' Lawns**

*by Nancy Henderson and Sue Mohn*

Many homeowners want to employ “green” and “sustainable” practices. Fortunately, many lawn contractors are willing to oblige. Sustainable approaches help save our landscapes from harmful practices that do little to maintain our lawns in good growing health. Here are six steps you, or your landscape contractor, can take to transform your lawn into a healthy, sustainable environment.

#### **1. Do you really want grass?**

Analyze the areas of your yard in terms of use. A safe, healthy play area for children usually means grass, but sitting areas might be groundcover or woodland edge with some hardscape for chairs or a bench. A wildflower meadow that is mowed just once a year late in the fall after first frost is an option. If you know you want a new grass lawn, or if you want to ‘perk up’ an existing lawn, follow the steps below.

#### **2. Test for success**

The condition of your lawn soil is at the very root, quite literally, of a healthy lawn. Every spring, you or your lawn contractor should test the soil to determine if any organic soil additives are needed. Purchase a soil test kit at your garden center or take soil samples and send them to the University of Massachusetts laboratory ([www.umass.edu/soiltest/](http://www.umass.edu/soiltest/)). Then follow the recommended steps from the testing to amend your soil accordingly. Your lawn will have the best soil conditions from which to draw nutrients for a healthy growing season.

#### **3. Core Aeration: how and why**

Mechanical or hand-powered aerators can be used to cut holes that allow your lawn to absorb more water, stimulate deeper root growth and reduce soil compaction. Lawn aeration also allows air and nutrients direct access to the root system. Because the aerators are heavy and somewhat difficult to operate, you may want to hire a contractor to do it for you. Core aeration that removes core plugs from your lawn is optimum since it gives your soil room for expansion and reduces stress on the lawn roots. As roots grow deeper, you won't need to water as often which helps conserve water consumption, a goal of sustainable lawn care. Top dressing your lawn with compost following aeration further contributes to lawn health.

#### **4. Think about seeds**

The best kinds of grass seed are those that will produce a sustainable lawn, one which is deep rooted, slow growing, low maintenance, and that requires less fertilization, less

watering and minimal, less frequent mowing. The seed should be selected for your soil and sun conditions. Good sustainable grass seed choices are available from [www.prairienursery.com](http://www.prairienursery.com) and from Pearl's Premium grass seed.

### **5. Everything in its season: planting time**

The best times to seed a lawn, or over-seed the bare patches, are between April 1<sup>st</sup> to June 15 or from August 15 to October 15<sup>th</sup>. Soil temperature and rainfall conditions are most ideal for seed germination and lawn growth. Fall seeding will naturally produce lawns with less weed growth than those seeded in spring. Seeding should be done after soil testing and aeration.

### **6. Water**

For newly seeded or top-dressed lawns, a 15-minute watering once in the early morning and again in the afternoon using inexpensive battery operated timers provides a fairly foolproof regimen. Three waterings might be needed in area of intense sun.

For established lawns, watering deeply only in dry times is recommended. Set the timer for 45 minutes, then dig a small hole to determine if the water has reached the bottom of the grass roots. The aim is to encourage deep roots which will then sustain the grass in dry times.

*The most experienced gardeners at the Lincoln Garden Club have written these sustainable gardening tips. They have read books, taken classes, made mistakes, and enjoyed successes over their years of gardening in Lincoln. Their articles are designed to demystify the process of developing sustainable gardening practices. Look for these articles in The Lincoln Journal, on the Garden Club website ([www.LincolnGardenClub.org](http://www.LincolnGardenClub.org)), and in the Sustainable Landscaping section of the Greening Lincoln website ([www.GreeningLincoln.org](http://www.GreeningLincoln.org).)*