

Go Green with a Grassless Lawn

by Susan Camp

Spring is here and a property owner's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of lawns. Rolling expanses of velvety green grass inviting one to walk barefoot, spread a blanket for a picnic, rest in the shade of an old oak tree. Wrong story- put the fairytale book away. Pull out the volume with the information on seeding, watering, fertilizing, mowing, and all the chemicals to get rid of pesky weeds. Throw in the price of a lawnmower and gas, equipment maintenance, long hours sweating in the sun, and you begin to wonder if a green, weed-free lawn is really worth the trouble.

Since the end of World War II, a big piece of the American Dream has involved the house in the suburbs and the impeccably maintained green lawn. We are daily bombarded with television commercials for chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides to help us maintain that green perfection. Unfortunately, the use of so many chemicals over the years has had a negative effect on our waterways and has proven damaging to wildlife.

For many citizens of rural counties like Gloucester, Mathews, and Middlesex, the perfectly groomed, weed-free lawn becomes an unreachable goal. As I tell friends, "We don't have a lawn, we have a field". Our house is close to Cedarbush Creek and the marsh. Our land is home to countless birds, insects, and furry critters, not to mention the scaly and finny ones who live in and around the water. They are all welcome here.

Our trials began several years ago with home renovations that necessitated destroying the narrow strips of grass behind and on either side of our house. Since that time, few blades have poked their little green heads out of the earth. The above-mentioned field is further away from the house. I often wish I could move some of its greenness closer. We want to preserve and protect the land, marsh, and creek habitats while continuing to enjoy a lawn rather than bare dirt, but we don't want to use toxic chemicals just to have grass.

This dilemma—wild habitat without grass or grass with potential to cause damage—has pushed me to investigate some alternatives to grass. Spring is not the time of year to plant a lawn in Tidewater Virginia, but it is the perfect time to think about and plan for the fall.

Accordingly, I have included several alternatives to the classic green lawn. Once I started researching the topic, I found that more and more busy people are looking for cheaper and less labor-intensive alternatives that are attractive, and, in some cases, unique. Some older gardening books suggested plants such as English ivy (*Hedera helix*) periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), and creeping liriopie (*Liriope spicata*). While all of these plants provide excellent groundcover, today they are considered to be non-native invasives and should be used in a tightly controlled environment, if at all.

More recent articles on grass alternatives include a wide variety of plants to fulfill your need for green without resorting to Brady Bunch artificial turf. One plant mentioned in many articles is white or Dutch clover (*Trifolium repens*). Clover seed is inexpensive, needs no fertilizer and minimal watering and mowing. It stays green in the summer heat. Clover is comfortable to walk on, although it may not withstand heavy foot traffic. Added bonus of clover: flower tiaras, four leaf clovers, and bees!

Creeping thyme (*Thymus praecox*) is another potential choice. Thyme is inexpensive and spreads quickly. It is comfortable to walk on and emits a pleasant fragrance when crushed underfoot. Lovely, tiny, pink or white flowers provide color and texture. Of course, you can pick it to use in your spaghetti sauce. Creeping oregano (*Origanum vulgare*) is another herb that can be used as a grass replacement, as well as in the kitchen. Oregano will provide the pleasant effects of thyme, but is more prone to damage from being walked on.

Various mosses can provide green interest, particularly in shady, damp areas under trees. We tend to think of moss as something undesirable that occurs when the soil is not healthy. It is true that mosses occur in acidic, poorly drained, compacted soils. There are ways to get rid of moss, but then we are back to the expensive, time-consuming labor we have been trying to avoid. Why not let the moss work for you? According to Virginia Cooperative Extension publication 430-536, the decline of mosses and lichens in an area indicate a negative environmental change. They thrive in an environment where the air and water are healthy. Mosses can be transplanted to create a crazy quilt of color and texture or you can use one variety for a smooth, velvety look. Mosses prefer an acidic pH around 5.5, so that soil test through Virginia Cooperative Extension is a necessity.

One final choice I want to mention is making your peace with Mother Nature and living with a few weeds. Believe it or not, the weeds you loathe are someone else's wildflowers. Many are native plants. Purple dead nettles (*Lamium purpureum*) and henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*) grow without any human help. I understand that young dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) leaves are delicious sautéed or in a salad. My personal favorites are the dainty wild violets (*Viola odorata*) that grow in profusion in our field. I make Wild Violet Jelly from them, great with soft cheese and water crackers.

Whether you decide to stay with a traditional lawn or experiment with an alternative, it is comforting to know that you can always change to something else. There are endless ways to achieve that green perfection!

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