

Alternatives to Lawns

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Lush green lawns can be pleasing to the eye and cooling to the toes on a warm spring day. They can be a sanctuary to read and relax, but factors like shade from evergreen trees, moss, dry summers, water conservation (and bills!), herbicides and synthetic fertilizers can disrupt those happy feelings. Having a small natural lawn—or even another foot-friendly alternative—can satisfy the eye and be healthier for our Puget Sound ecosystem. If you're starting from bare soil, consider starting your landscape design without a lawn, opting instead for a more environmentally conscious alternative such as a rain garden, groundcover “lawn” or rock garden. For established lawns, experiment with them by letting them go natural, allowing edible and pollinator-friendly weeds such as dandelions and English daisies to take over. Seed with native wildflowers and allow moss to creep into shaded lawn areas.

Lawn Alternatives

Try designing a rain garden, a groundcover ‘lawn’, or a rock garden instead of a lawn. These lawn alternatives can be healthier for Puget Sound because they require less maintenance and care. Rain gardens filter airborne particles that collect on roofs and when it rains they prevent these particles from entering the city’s storm water overflow systems and ultimately Puget Sound. Use native plants when possible because they require less care and maintenance than plants that are not acclimated to the Pacific Northwest.

A groundcover “lawn” can be planted to take over large spaces and can look and feel just as luxurious as a freshly mowed lawn. For instance, walking on a bed of Corsican mint can not only be gentle on the feet but also provides aromatherapy from the smell of mint drifting up to the nose. Some groundcovers for sunny areas are rupturewort, thyme, Sceleranthus and New Zealand brass buttons. For shady areas, kinnickinnik, ornamental mosses and Corsican mint are good choices.

Rock gardens are another option for grass replacement, especially in hot, sunny areas where drought tolerance is desired. Create a dry river bed with different sizes of rocks, strategically placing larger rocks for a natural look, and plant dry-hardy plants such as sedums and succulents, some ornamental grasses, yuccas and rock roses. But remember to water new plants regularly for the first two to three years to become established. Once ready, as long as the plants are in their desired habitat they will require very little water. It is always best to mulch new plantings as well to keep soil cool in the summer, conserve water and prevent weeds.

Lawn Xeriscaping

If a lawn is already established, an option is to let it go “wild” by creating a natural meadow-like area; allow edible dandelions and English daisies to creep into the lawn and reseed with a native, eco-friendly lawn seed mix that may include wildflowers and clover for nitrogen fixation. These native plants can reduce the amount of water needed for supplemental water from irrigation, eliminate the need for synthetic fertilizers and tolerate native soil conditions.

Reducing the area of your lawn, perhaps in favor of a new flower bed, can be as simple as sheet mulching—layering cardboard or newspaper over the grass and topping with different types of organic mulches such as straw, leaves, and grass clippings.

Shade and Moss

If shady conditions are leaving lawn areas bare, allow moss to form in these areas. Mixes for reseeding lawns most often contain seed that are only tolerant in partial shady conditions at best. Heavily shaded lawns sometimes need to be reseeded twice a year which can be pricey. Moss is native, so it will tolerate

the acidic, moist, shady conditions that already exist. Allowing the moss to take over an area instantly creates a natural woodland garden that is a lovely green color and soft to walk on too!

Resources:

King County website; Honey, I shrunk the Lawn!

<https://www.kingcounty.gov/services/environment/stewardship/nw-yard-and-garden/shrunk-lawn.aspx>

The Seattle Times; Eco-friendly Lawns: the natural look is in;

<https://www.seattletimes.com/explore/nwhomes/eco-friendly-lawns-the-natural-look-is-in/>

Sunset Magazine; Plant a No-Mow Lawn; [https://www.sunset.com/garden/garden-basics/plant-no-mow-](https://www.sunset.com/garden/garden-basics/plant-no-mow-lawn?utm_expid=.2cZJr14QScAXBACbAO1APw.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)

[lawn?utm_expid=.2cZJr14QScAXBACbAO1APw.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.sunset.com/garden/garden-basics/plant-no-mow-lawn?utm_expid=.2cZJr14QScAXBACbAO1APw.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)

For more information about alternatives to lawns, natural lawn care and plant selection, please contact the Garden Hotline at (206) 633-0224 or submit your question at www.gardenhotline.org. Be sure to visit us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest!

The Garden Hotline is managed by Tilth Alliance and sponsored by Seattle Public Utilities, the Hazardous Waste Management Program of King County, RainWise program of Seattle and King County, Saving Water Partnership, and Cascade Water Alliance.

