



How to Create an Alternative Lawn

The Alternative Lawn

American lawns are typically seeded or sodded with non-native turf grasses. Resistant to the wear and tear of foot traffic and capable of spreading quickly via rhizomes, Kentucky bluegrass has historically been the dominant turfgrass of choice throughout the U.S. However, wide swings in temperature, rainfall, and seasonal variability—conditions frequently experienced in the Twin Cities region—make maintaining the perpetually verdant, manicured aesthetic of the traditional turfgrass lawn challenging.

The cultural ideal of the American lawn requires time and vigilance, ongoing inputs of chemical fertilizers and weed-killers, as well as regular watering and mowing with a gasoline-powered lawn mower. In recent years, growing nationwide concern over the negative environmental impacts of the traditional American lawn has led to a rising public interest in alternatives to traditional input-heavy turfgrass.

The continental U.S. has over 40 million acres of residential and commercial grass lawns—equivalent to the acreage used to grow wheat, the U.S.’s fourth largest food crop. The challenge in creating an alternative lawn is that there is no ideal replacement for the traditional non-native turfgrasses that carpet our nation’s yards. These lawns can take a beating—from heavy athletic use, to pet play, to soil compaction.



A landscape on a “lawn diet.”

A small grassed area can be used as a design element in a yard by creating intentional negative space—a visual resting area that offsets other denser plantings on the property. *Pictured here:* a traditional lawn of previously planted Kentucky bluegrass supplemented with native Pennsylvania sedge, yarrow, violets, and strawberry. Dutch white clover growing in this lawn found its way in on its own and was not intentionally planted.



An “alternative” lawn of Pennsylvania sedge, violets, and rue anemone.

The term “bee lawn” is sometimes used as a catch-all for a flowering lawn that is “something other” than a monoculture of traditional turf. The idea of the bee lawn can cause confusion, however, because creating a lawn for optimal wild bee health is at odds with the typical high impact use desired of turfgrass. If one’s objective is to meaningfully help a wide range of native bee species, then planting an undisturbed and unmowed area with regionally native vegetation would be the habitat of choice in order to offer pollinators optimal and diverse sources of nutrition, places to live and reproduce.

Alternatives to Traditional Turfgrass:

Buffalo grass

Fescue blends — *In the Twin Cities region these blends are typically a mix of sheep fescue, chewings fescue, hard fescue, red fescue, and creeping red fescue. Avoid seed mixes that include Kentucky bluegrass if possible. Check the label for the species list.*

Low-growing Grass Companions:

Common Blue Violet (*Viola sororia*)

Field Pussytoes (*Antennaria neglecta*)

Golden Ragwort [aka. Groundsel] (*Packera aurea*)

Partridge Pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*)

Pasque Flower (*Anemone patens*)

Prairie Phlox (*Phlox pilosa*)

Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*)

Prairie Violet (*Viola pedatifida*)

Plantain-leaved Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*)

Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*)

Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*)

Wild Blue Phlox [aka. Woodland Phlox] (*Phlox divaricata*)

Native Vegetation that Has the Potential to Bloom Despite Frequent Mowing:

Aster species (*Symphyotrichum* spp.)

Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)

Partridge Pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*)

Wild Petunia (*Ruellia humilis*)

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)



Some native plants tolerate repeated mowing well. Native asters are especially adept at surviving lawn mower blades and growing in miniature “bonsai” form. Perhaps an ancient defense mechanism from millennia of grazing animals. Pictured here: sedge, sky blue aster and pussytoes.



If one’s objective is to meaningfully help a wide range of native bee species, then planting an undisturbed meadow of native vegetation would be the habitat of choice. Pictured here: Mother Nature’s own design, Nerstrand Big Woods State Park.



The versatility of deeper rooted no-mow or low-mow fescue “eco-grass” mixes offers an appealing environmentally gentle alternative to traditional input-intense turfgrasses. Fescue lawns do not require fertilizer, or frequent mowing or watering. Fescue lawns can be left to grow long for decorative interest, or can be mowed for a more traditional manicured look. Pictured here: a lawn created from a blend of sheep fescue, chewings fescue, hard fescue, red fescue, and creeping red fescue.

A variety of alternatives to traditional turf, such as deeper-rooted fescues that require little fertilizer, and drought-resilient buffalo grass, are becoming more widely available —and culturally accepted. Seed mixes that combine traditional turfgrass with a fescue blend, in order to increase resilience throughout an entire growing season, are also readily available.

The care of the traditional American lawn, however, need not be incompatible with good land stewardship. A shift in some simple maintenance practices can yield impactful results. Allowing grass to grow longer results in a deeper—less thirsty and more drought resilient—root system. A general rule of thumb is that the height of grass blades aboveground is mirrored by roots of the same length belowground. As a general guideline, maintaining turfgrass at three inches creates a more resilient root system without sacrificing the tidy look of a manicured lawn. Additionally, grass clippings left on a lawn become a natural fertilizer. Per the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, “Grass clippings can provide the equivalent of about one application of fertilizer per year.” Refer to pca.state.mn.us/living-green/grow-healthy-no-waste-lawn-and-garden for more great tips for ecologically mindful lawn care.

Pollinators need a diversity of native flowering plants that supply pollen and nectar sources, and provide a continuous succession of blooms throughout the growing season. A well-planned and diverse native garden can help support a variety of pollinating insects. While not a substitute for the ecological integrity of a diverse native garden, a handful of native plants growing in a less frequently mowed lawn can provide pollinators with some supplemental nutrition.