



A grassy area in your landscape can be a comfortable place for kids and pets to play, a good spot to set up a table and chairs, and a frame for the house. A large swath of lawn, however, needs a lot of attention and resources, from weekly mowing to fertilization and weed control. And a monocrop of turf-grass is a missed opportunity for gardeners and the ecosystem. A more diverse mix of plants can bring four seasons of beauty to your yard and provide food and shelter for many creatures with whom we share our space, while requiring much less care. **If you are spending time tending more lawn than you need, consider these ideas for reducing its size and maintenance demands.**

Edible Landscaping

Space devoted to lawns can be more valuable when it's used to grow food. You and your family get to enjoy the freshest food and you can increase access to healthy food for all people by donating your excess to local organizations through the PHS Harvest 2021 project.

Better yet, you can produce a lot of food even without laying out dedicated vegetable beds on your lawn. An edible landscape (*sometimes referred to as a "foodscape"*) blends ornamental plants with food crops in cultivated spaces in a way that can earn the approval of even strict homeowners associations.

You can choose from a wide range of plants to mix into your landscape. Dwarf and espalier fruit trees, such as apples and pears, fit neatly into small areas, they bloom in beautiful colors in spring, and they bear fruit in late summer and fall. Chile peppers turn brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow when summer flowers are nearly finished blooming. Colorful salad greens and herbs work well as borders for flower beds. Bean vines grow up fence or mailbox posts, bloom for a few weeks, and produce green, red, purple, and mottled pods. You can plant grains such as oats and buckwheat in clumps like ornamental grasses.

Ground Covers

Low-growing plants that gradually spread to cover more space from year to year can be effective alternatives to turf grass. Many types of ground covers are green all season long, bloom with pretty flowers, have appealing fragrances, and attract pollinators and other beneficial insects. Most ground covers need much less care and resources than grass. Some ground covers can even handle moderate foot traffic.

There are diverse options, so you can choose one or more that suit your needs best. You can pick ground covers that fare better in the shade better than grass does. Others are ideal for preventing erosion on slopes or fitting into narrow spaces such as the "hell strip" between streets and sidewalks.

Here are a few different types of ground covers to consider:

Creeping Thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*)

A low-growing variety of the familiar culinary herb, creeping thyme is rugged enough to walk on and releases a pleasant scent when crushed. Its wide-spreading root system makes it useful for controlling erosion.

Roman Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*)

The foliage of this fast-spreading herb emits a fresh, apple-like fragrance when it's stepped on. In summer, Roman chamomile bears tiny white flowers and the stems reach about **12 inches high**, but you can mow it once or twice a season to keep it short.

Pennsylvania Sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*)

Sedges are close botanical cousins of the grasses and look a lot like them. This native species forms dense mats of medium green, fine-textured foliage that **reaches 6 to 8 inches tall**, which you can mow a couple times in summer. The best way to plant Pennsylvania sedge is from plugs in fall or spring.



Mazus (*Mazus reptans*)

In shady areas with some daily foot traffic, Mazus can be the right plant. It grows **about 2 inches tall** and spreads by creeping stems. The narrow, bright green leaves become an attractive carpet of foliage, with tiny, purplish-blue flowers appearing in late spring to early summer.

Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*)

An aggressive spreader that thrives in damp conditions and full sun to partial shade, creeping Jenny (*aka moneywort*) grows into a leafy mat that's **2 to 3 inches high**. Cup-shaped, bright yellow flowers bloom in early summer.

Turf Alternatives

The typical turf grass mixes used in the Mid-Atlantic region include Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. They need regular doses of fertilizer, watering during dry spells, weekly mowing, and periodic reseeding. If you want to reduce the demands of your lawn, you have a few other choices.

Fescues

A blend of hard fescue, chewings fescue, and creeping red fescue requires less maintenance than other kinds of turf. These grasses are green and lush, but naturally slow-growing so you mow them at most four to five times a year. **They are drought-tolerant and require little or no fertilizer.**

Clover

As recently as 40 years ago, clover was commonly included in grass seed mixes. It is a legume and like all members of the bean family, it pulls nitrogen out of the air and "fixes" in the soil, where other plants can feed on it. Clover tops out at **about 3 inches high**, is drought-tolerant, and spreads quickly to form a thick mat. And clover's white or red flowers provide nectar for bees and other beneficial insects.

Buffalograss

New to the turf trade, buffalograss is a slow-growing prairie plant that thrives in hot, dry, sunny conditions. It never needs fertilizing and can be mowed just a few times a year. **It is green in spring, summer, and fall, but turns grayish brown in cold temperatures.**

ADVISORY

Many communities and homeowners' associations enforce rules about lawn care. Before you make changes to your lawn and consider alternatives, research your local laws, if any exist. If need be, you may be able to apply for a variance but be prepared to explain your plans and commit to a acceptable maintenance.

FAST FACT

Running a lawnmower for one hour produces as much greenhouse gas emissions as driving a typical car 100 miles, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

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