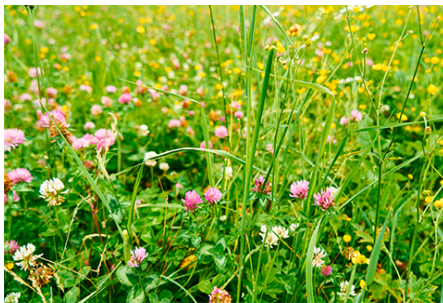


Features

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Lose the Lawn!

Dr. Richard Ludwig



No question, a billiard table green lawn is stunning and impressive—but it requires significant water, maintenance and chemicals, making it environmentally unsustainable. Regardless, a gorgeous green lawn is the sign of a well-kept landscape and source of pride for many homeowners. Turf installation and maintenance is a significant portion of Green Industry revenue, too. Unfortunately, few turf grasses offer pollinators or other beneficials anything. It's an environmental desert out there!

Clover can be used with wildflowers to create a meadow feel or on its own in the lawn. There's even a dwarf version!

So ... what are we to do? Landscapes in many parts of the country are turf-centered and sod is often installed by default for new homes. The lawn provides a great place to play, as well as acts as a foil, an important design component of any beautiful landscape composition. Can we find alternatives that work just as well, that deliver the same aesthetic quality, yet provide a more sustainable alternative?

The Answer Is ...

Yes! There are multiple excellent alternatives. One of my favorites is clover (white or mini). It's drought-resistant, very walkable and can be planted just about anywhere. There's even a dwarf version (*Trifolium repens* var. *Pipolina*) that's low growing to better create the look of a traditional lawn. Long-blooming clover plants will typically bloom from spring through fall, and are available in a variety of colors from white to pink and deep crimson.

You can mix clover into a wildflower meadow, sow it as a cover crop in your fruit and vegetable gardens, or sow seed directly into your lawn. Clover is one of honeybees' favorite foods. You'll also find many other critters visiting clover blossoms, including bumblebees and other beneficials—such as ladybugs, minute pirate bugs, lacewings and parasitoid wasps—which feed on the nectar, but more importantly, also feed on aphids, whiteflies, scales, cabbage worms and other destructive landscape insects.



Finally, my favorite reason to use clover is that it acts as a natural fertilizer. While pretty blooms charm above ground, below ground clover rejuvenates nutrient-poor soils and reduces the need for fertilizers. Clover is a legume, a plant family that performs a unique service in the plant world: nitrogen fixing. They transform nitrogen gas, found in air pockets in soil, into organic compounds that help fertilize plants. Legumes partner with beneficial bacteria in the soil, called Rhizobia, which grow in rounded nodules along the plant's roots.

Buffalo grass (*Bouteloua dactyloides*) makes a great no- or low-mow alternative to turf.

More than Clover

If you're not worried about pedestrian traffic and the kids don't need a place to play, another great choice is creeping thyme. Creeping thyme is a versatile herb, acting as a fragrant groundcover, suppressing weeds and adding visual interest, especially in rock gardens or between pavers. The leaves and flowers are edible, offering a subtle, herb flavor to dishes. Additionally, it's a drought-tolerant plant, making it a good choice for a sustainable, water-wise landscape.

A plant considered a weed in traditional monoculture turf is dichondra, also known as kidney-weed. However, it's a great turf alternative that's decorative, low-growing and requires little or no mowing. My favorite reason to plant it is because it naturally spreads to fill in sparse areas and is highly resistant to disease and other lawn threats. I've seen it do very well here in the South in partial shade, as well as full sun. The main negative is that it doesn't tolerate heavy foot traffic or play.

No- or Low-Mow Alternatives

If you're set on turfgrass, one that's more sustainable would be buffalo grass. Buffalo grass (*Bouteloua dactyloides*) is a warm-season grass native to North America. Its low maintenance and drought tolerance make it a good alternative. Even though it's a warm-season grass, it has relatively good cold hardiness (Zones 4 to 9). For a more manicured look, mow buffalo grass infrequently. Or, for a natural look, leave it untouched. By not mowing, you allow the grass to flower and go to seed, attracting wildlife such as birds and butterflies.

One paramount quality of a sustainable landscape is low maintenance and low input. Along with buffalo grass, no-mow fescue blends can offer this. The benefit of a blend is that some types will thrive, while others will struggle based on the soil and weather. A typical fescue blend might combine hard, sheep, chewings, creeping red and slender creeping red fescue seeds. By not mowing it you get low maintenance and grasses that can grow as tall as 16 in. It creates a flopped over, wind-tossed appearance, but can be mowed or line trimmed once or twice a year.

Non-Plant Options

A great non-living option would be mulch. It offers several benefits like moisture retention, weed control and soil improvement, and can be used on its own or in combination with other groundcovers or decorative elements. Because mulch creates a barrier preventing sunlight from reaching weed seeds, it inhibits their growth. Many folks use a weed barrier fabric beneath and that can be very effective. However, it can also be an issue with percolation and seeds germinating in the mulch above it. Never consider using black plastic, as it creates an anaerobic swamp beneath. Shredded hardwood appears to be a better choice, as it tends to stay put versus acting like small canoes during a heavy rainstorm!

Remember the old days of artificial turf? After a year or two it looked like a faded green carpet. No more! Artificial grass is growing in popularity thanks to new hyper-realist looks and heavy-duty, durable materials. It's a more eco-

friendly and affordable alternative to natural grass made from durable, synthetic fiber materials like nylon, polyethylene or polypropylene. Most fake grass is designed to withstand the outdoor elements, so it's UV stable, heat-resistant and frost-resistant. Modern artificial turf isn't just for landscaping and sport fields! People use it as flooring in gyms, doggy daycares, as playground flooring and, of course, for putting greens. To keep artificial turf clean and beautiful, you should rinse it off regularly to remove dirt and dust. Raking takes care of leaves and other debris, and can also keep the blades upright and natural-looking by "blooming" it. For larger messes like pet waste, pick up the mess, then hose down the area and let the water drain. You can also apply a turf deodorizer if needed.

As with just about everything, there are positives and negatives. Living turf alternatives require soil prep and some maintenance. Artificial turf saves water and doesn't need to be mowed, which benefits the environment. Many turf products are also made of recycled materials. However, there are some drawbacks when it comes to eco-friendliness. The plastic in turf is a petroleum-based product. Also, while it can be made from recycled plastic, turf isn't biodegradable.

So many options! Based on how the space is to be used and viewed, consider edibles such as strawberries, oregano and creeping rosemary. Sedum, corsican mint and Irish moss are also great substitutes. Don't forget non-living choices such as gravel and permeable pavers.

As a green industry professional, don't be afraid to think outside the box. There's no need to use pallets of traditional sod to cover the ground in a residential or commercial landscape. An attractive, sustainable alternative could be a much better choice! **GP**

Dr. Richard Ludwig has been a college educator for more than 30 years in horticulture, landscape design and landscape management. He was also a host of "GardenSmart" on PBS and was a garden specialist for Southern Living magazine. Contact him at ludwigrichard1@gmail.com.

Reduce Your Lawn Day

Don't forget: May 20 is officially Reduce Your Lawn Day. Visit ReduceYourLawnDay.org for more details and to print out signs and posters for next year's event.