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The argument for killing your lawn

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GARDENING



Jon Gorey - Globe Correspondent

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Admit it: As much as you love your lawn, there are moments when you've cursed it. Farming a green patch of grass is surprisingly time-consuming, resource-intensive, and costly.

Americans who engage in lawn and garden care spend more than four hours a week futzing with their yards, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). We spend billions of dollars a year on fertilizer, mowers, and other lawn and garden supplies, and collectively apply [59 million pounds of pesticides](#) to our yards each year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. That doesn't even include the amounts professional lawn services and landscapers use.

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More than a fifth of Massachusetts is covered in turfgrass, which is by far the single

largest irrigated “crop” in America, according to a 2005 estimate the National Aeronautics and Space Administration reached using satellite imaging. It sucks up about a third of all residential water use nationwide, or roughly 9 billion gallons a day, [according to the EPA](#).

The reason our lawns demand so much time, money, water, pesticides, and fertilizer is simple, said Mark Richardson, director of horticulture at [Tower Hill Botanic Garden](#) in Boylston and coauthor of “[Native Plants for New England Gardens](#).” Just as the concept of a rolling green expanse was imported from English and French estates, our lawns mostly consist of cool-season European turfgrasses that are ill-suited to our hot summers. (Despite its name, Kentucky bluegrass is not native to North America.) “In the Northeast, we’ll always have to water our lawns to keep them green in summer,” Richardson said. “These species aren’t adapted to our climate, so we keep them on life support,” he added, forcing them to stay alive through artificial means when all they want is to go dormant for the summer. “It’s a perpetual cycle of environmental catastrophe.”

And while it’s certainly preferable to pavement or concrete, turfgrass doesn’t exactly create a wildlife refuge. “A monocultural lawn is really an ecological desert,” said Heidi Ricci, assistant director of advocacy at the [Massachusetts Audubon Society](#). At a time when the importance of our local food supply is clearer than ever, pollinators like honey bees and butterflies could use our help.

For these reasons and more, Richardson urges homeowners to replace at least a portion of their lawn, if not the entire thing, with native plants, which have adapted to thrive in our climate with very little maintenance or watering required. That can simply mean reclaiming more yard space for vegetable or pollinator gardens, supporting food sources for both humans and wildlife. But there are also native ground covers that can

create a lush layer of green underfoot.

“If I had to choose one plant as a lawn alternative, it would be wild strawberry,” Richardson said. An aggressive spreader, it forms a dense mat of nearly evergreen foliage that controls weeds, he said. And after a flashy floral display in May, it yields tiny, tasty strawberries in June and a bit of color in fall. While it doesn’t look like turfgrass and isn’t conducive to, say, a soccer match, wild strawberry stays low to the ground, can handle some foot traffic, and can be mowed once a year for a more even appearance.

In shady areas, Richardson recommends the native and dense-spreading [Pennsylvania sedge](#). Mowed annually after a flush of growth in the spring, he said, “for 10 months a year, it looks like a typical lawn.”

Martha Gach, conservation coordinator at Mass Audubon’s [Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center and Wildlife Sanctuary](#) in Worcester, also suggests using native Appalachian and Pennsylvania sedges to replace or complement an ordinary lawn. But while they can withstand trampling and backyard barbecues, they’re not great for sports, she said. “They grow in clumps rather than from runners, so they’re not as smooth as those European turfgrasses.”

Joanna Vieira, director of horticulture at [The Trustees of Reservations](#), recommends [phlox stolonifera](#) for ground cover in shaded areas. “It’s a woodland phlox, and it’s just gorgeous,” Vieira said. Available in pink, purple, or white-flowered cultivars, she added, it blooms in May, has a light fragrance to it, and forms a dense ground cover the rest of the year.

[Creeping thyme](#) is another low-growing favorite of Vieira’s. “Thyme just creates this beautiful carpet, which will have a flowering period. Even when it’s not in flower, when you walk across it the fragrance of the thyme is really a lovely experience,” she said. In

sunny spots, she added, you can mix in the native moss phlox, [phlox subulata](#), which also flowers in spring.



Phlox transforms the front yard of a Hingham Cape. —Jon Gorey

Moss phlox also looks great cascading down a hill in full bloom. Other good options for a slope are [little bluestem](#) and [purple lovegrass](#), Gach said, as are native grasses, whose deep roots can help halt soil erosion. Vieira looks to shrubs like [lowbush blueberries](#) for sunny slopes. “They provide so much both for us and for pollinators and for songbirds,” she said. “You’re getting those beautiful flowers in the spring for the bumblebees, you’re getting the fruit for yourself and for the birds, and you get great fall color out of them. And they create a nice slow-growing mat that will cover a slope.”

When rethinking an outdoor space, Vieira acts as if she were painting a picture. Starting with a shrub layer and working down from there, she tries to incorporate native plants that attract pollinators and provide visual interest all year, even in winter. She likes [witch hazel](#) for its early yellow bloom and fall foliage — “they give you such a great burst of color in the spring, and they’re out with flowers open when there’s not much else for

pollinators” — and [winterberry](#), which bursts with bright-red berries around the holidays.

For a pop of fall color, Gach said [goldenrods](#) and [New England asters](#) create a complementary combination of gold and bluish purple. “Goldenrods will grow anywhere and support so many different kinds of insects,” she said.

Unfortunately, transitioning from lawn to native garden isn’t always as easy as scattering wildflower seeds in the grass and letting them grow; seeds struggle to compete with established turf. One fast way to replace a portion of lawn with native plants is to dig up the turf, roots and all, add compost, and start planting. But it’s also extremely hard work.

Vieira said suppression is an easier, but slower strategy: Cover the grass with a thick layer of newspapers, then top it with compost and natural mulch to hold it in place. Starved of sunlight, the turf will break down underneath and form a welcoming bed for plants the following season.

Another option is to plant full-size perennials amid the existing turf and let all of it grow. You’ll still need to intervene from time to time, pulling out woody plants or invasive weeds. “When you’re transitioning to a meadow, it doesn’t mean you’re just letting things go,” Vieira said. “If you do, the forest will take over — I mean, New England wants to be a forest.”

While a meadow of wildflowers will delight butterflies and bumblebees, your neighbors (or future home buyers) may be less impressed. Mowing the outside edges to frame the space can signal that it’s an intentional landscape still under your care. “Mowing a path through and having a little sitting area with Adirondack chairs is another signal that this is a treasured space,” Vieira said.

Parents of young, active children may also worry that a loss of lawn could backfire. But Gach said a yard with more plant variety offers plenty of interest for curious kids. “You have whole layers of the food chain there. You’ve got caterpillars to find crawling around, beetles crawling around, salamanders in the leaf litter.”

Still, even Richardson maintains some turf area in his yard for his soccer-loving kids. And it’s important to note that grass itself is not a villain: It helps with soil erosion and storm runoff and absorbs carbon from the atmosphere. The real problem is the way we grow it, which offsets that impact. “If we didn’t put so much energy into grass, it would be a good carbon sink,” Vieira said.

So wherever you do have lawn, Gach suggests mowing less often and cutting the grass higher when you do — around 4 inches. “It encourages deeper roots and keeps the grass greener without watering in summer,” she said, noting a University of Massachusetts study that found that mowing every two weeks brings a greater diversity of pollinators to a yard.

“Mulch when you mow – it’s free fertilizer,” Gach added, and use artificial fertilizers sparingly. “People tend to think that ‘more is better’ when you use fertilizer, which only stresses the grass and fertilizes your nearest stream or pond – a whole other issue.”

The same goes for pesticides and herbicides, which can also end up on little hands and paws. Regardless of whether they’re chemical- or organic-based, Ricci said, “pesticides are designed to be poisonous; they’re designed to kill.”

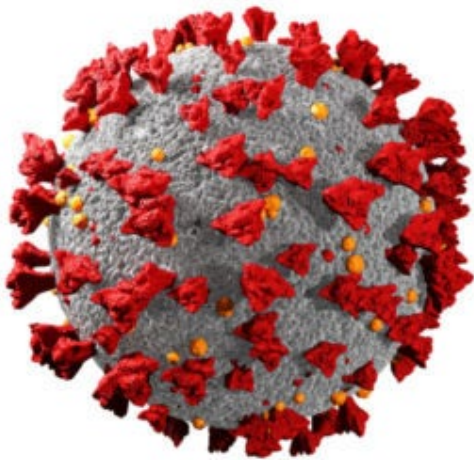
Gach suggests hand-picking dandelions or just leaving them for the bees. In fact, the simplest step you can take is to adjust your expectations and embrace plants we’ve been conditioned to think of as weeds, like dandelions and clovers — the latter of which are drought-resistant, grow in poor soil, and fertilize the ground by fixing atmospheric

nitrogen for plants to feed on. "Clovers aren't necessarily native, but they're good for bees and bunnies if you let them bloom, and they green up a lawn in the summer without using water," Gach said.

Because sometimes the greenest yards are yellow, violet, and red, too.

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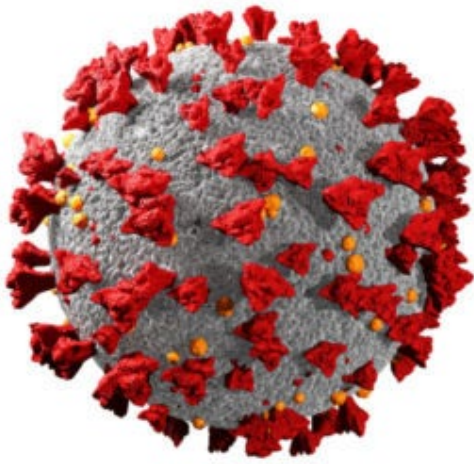
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