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Green & Healthy Maine HOMES

SPRING 2024

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CARBON-CUTTING MADE EASY(er)
ARE HEAT PUMPS RIGHT FOR MY HOME?
NATURE-INSPIRED INTERIOR DESIGN

Display through August, 2024

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Turf matters

WORDS AND PHOTOS KERRY LEWIS

The ecological benefits of shrinking your lawn

A few sobering facts about lawns in the United States:



American lawn covers 30–40 million acres, or 2% of U.S. land.



Gas-powered lawn mowers contribute to 5% of air pollution annually nationwide.



Collectively, homeowners spend billions of dollars annually and use ten times the number of pesticides and fertilizers per acre on lawns as farmers do on crops.



Overapplication of nitrogen-based fertilizers run off and become a major source of water pollution, harming waterways and wildlife.



30–60% of urban fresh water is used to sustain lawns. Lawns use more irrigation water than any agricultural “crop” grown in the United States.



Lawns are biodiversity deserts which contribute to a vanishing insect population.

HOW CAN THE AVERAGE HOMEOWNER make a difference? I recently sat down with Emily Baisden of Wild Seed Project in North Yarmouth to discuss accessible entry points into sustainable landscaping for the Maine homeowner. Our conversation focused specifically on the ecological benefits of reducing turf grass in home landscapes.

Some immediate easy remedies are available. First, ensure the turf is mowed to a minimum height of 3 inches. Taller turf encourages deeper root systems, which require less water and create a more robust condition that can outcompete aggressive weed species like crabgrass.

Next, consider both modest “evolutionary” and higher commitment “revolutionary” changes.

Bluestone steppers with creeping thyme joints traverse a sloped planting of lowbush blueberry, blue star (Amsonia “Blue Ice”) and Pennsylvania Sedge.

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EXAMPLES OF MODEST “EVOLUTIONARY” APPROACHES INCLUDE:

- Investing in an electric mower rather than using gas.
- Planning for more efficient watering, such as watering in the early morning when soil can absorb the most moisture before it evaporates in the hot sun later in the day.
- Applying less fertilizer and pesticides at the appropriate time. For example, cool season grasses that are prevalent in New England turf lawns should be fertilized when the lawn is actively growing, between late March through early May and between late September and early November.

If you want to go all in with a “revolutionary” approach, consider the following suggestions:

CHANGE THE TYPE OF TURF TO MORE DROUGHT-TOLERANT SPECIES, interplanting the turf with clover, violets or creepers like thyme, or consider removing sections of turf altogether and replacing it with native plants. You might automatically think of creating a meadow in place of a traditional turf lawn. However, Maine is not historically a meadow-supporting climate, and a meadow can take up to seven years to become self-sustaining. Meadows also require active maintenance: I have just over one

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A fieldstone wall and rustic fence are set off by meadow-inspired perennial plantings, including Joe Pye Weed, Little Bluestem and Black-Eyed Susans.



A meandering footpath travels through a tapestry of low grasses and perennials replacing traditional turf lawn in this entry garden.

acre of meadow on my property and need to regularly cull out the aggressive players, like Canada Goldenrod, which could turn my meadow into a monoculture if left untended.

A more accessible approach is to **PLANT SHRUBS IN SMALLER SECTIONS OF ELIMINATED TURF**. Baisden recommends an easy method of digging up the sod and turning it over, dirt-side up, and then using those sections of turf as a mulch around the root zone of newly planted native shrubs, such as highbush blueberry, red or black chokeberry or winterberry holly in moister areas.

EDGE HABITATS MADE UP OF SHRUBS AND UNDERSTORY LAYERS hold significant value for birds and wildlife and are progressively disappearing due to the development of new residential lots. Lawns stretch up to the forest edge with no intermediate mid-layer connection. **PRESERVING ALL THREE LAYERS OF A NATIVE LANDSCAPE**—canopy, understory and ground layer—is essential for sustaining a healthy habitat. Perhaps start your lawn removal at this junction of lawn and tree canopy, inserting native shrubs and groundcovers to recreate that critical understory layer.

Consider **EXPLORING PLANT GUILDS**, which can guide you toward the recreation of a plant “community” where plants thrive together in shared conditions. Wild Seed Project (wildseedproject.net) has excellent publications available for native trees, shrubs and groundcovers that are invaluable educational tools. Additionally, explore the National Wildlife Federation website (nwf.org) for resources on what species are local to your area.

Once you start seeing the increase in bird, butterfly and caterpillar activity in these edge habitats, I guarantee you’ll be ripping more turf out in the seasons to come. **G&HM**

The author’s home garden features an impressive array of leaf textures and colors.

