

REDUCING PESTICIDES

it's perfectly natural.



LAWN ALTERNATIVES AND ORGANIC CARE OF GROUNDCOVERS

A grass lawn that looks like a plush green carpet is time consuming and expensive to maintain. You may be using unhealthy chemicals to maintain it. This fact sheet provides information on alternatives to lawns.

Although a grass lawn has the advantage of withstanding heavy foot traffic, which makes it excellent for children's games or sports fields, there are a number of reasons why you might want to get rid of a grass lawn. These include:

- Grass needs 2 – 3 cm of water every 3 – 7 days, depending on weather, soil and drainage.
- Mowing reduces grass' ability to make food, hence requiring regular fertilization.
- A plush lawn attracts insect pests which then spread easily and rapidly.
- Pesticides and herbicides (now banned in many places) run off into streams and can contaminate our drinking water. They may harm children and pets who walk and play on the recently treated lawns and may drift to neighbouring gardens and homes.
- A lawn with one type of grass discourages wildlife – it has no biodiversity.

Groundcovers, which include grass, are plants that are usually less than 30 cm in height and grow in a form that covers the ground. They may be used to cover a large area, as in lawn replacements, or smaller areas in planting beds. The advantages of groundcovers include:

- They protect the soil from excessive drying by the sun or by wind and reduce erosion.
- They blanket the soil keeping it warmer in winter and cooler in summer.
- Weed growth will be reduced or suppressed.
- Dead and decaying leaves will add a small amount of nutrients to the soil.
- The plants may provide shelter for beneficial organisms such as lady bugs or toads.
- Green plants provide essential oxygen during daylight hours. Paving, etc., does not.
- They require little maintenance, no chemical fertilizers and little or no pesticides.

To replace an existing lawn with an alternative ground cover, you should:

- Review light and soil conditions and expected usage; choose plants to match these.
- Completely remove the existing grass and compost the turf.
- Improve the soil by digging in organic matter (leaf mould, compost) and coarse sand for drainage (if needed).
- Either plant seeds or small plants according to the directions for the chosen plant(s).
- Water well until established. An organic mulch will help reduce weeds.



This fact sheet has been prepared by the Toronto Master Gardeners



Groundcover Plants for Lawn Replacement

Clover lawn or grass & clover mix – White clover is often considered a pest in lawns. However, the roots add essential nitrogen to the soil and it is a low maintenance alternative to grass. It requires full sun, occasional mowing, little water and no chemicals. It can be played on and is resistant to dogs' urine. Care: rake in Dutch white clover seeds in late winter – early spring. Water as necessary. Mow with blades at 3.5 – 4 cm until established and then up to 9 cm. Leave clippings in place. Reseed, if necessary, in three years.

Thyme – Low-growing *Thymus* species and cultivars will make an attractive lawn for a dry, sandy, well-drained area in full sun. Walking on it a few times a day will not kill it. Cultivars have leaves with differing colours and textures. Flower colour is from deep pink to pale pink and white. Care: plant plugs in spring, 15 – 30 cm apart with at least five plants of one kind together. The ground will be covered in six months. Water frequently at first, then every 2 – 3 weeks as needed. No mowing is required. Dead flowers can be removed with a bagging mower. Set the blade height so the flowers, not the leaves are removed. Lightly rake in the spring to remove dead stems. Spread 1 cm of fine textured compost to help fill in winter damaged patches. Paving stones should be added for a regularly used path.

Prostrate Juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis* “Wiltoni” and other cultivars) – This juniper is a flat shrub which grows in sunny, well-drained soils. It is suitable for slopes. Its strong looks combine well with large ornamental grasses. Care: remove any damaged stems. Pruning should be done carefully as no sprouts grow from old wood.

Sweet woodruff (*Gallium odoratum* syn. *Asperula odorata*) – This makes a low mat of small thin bright green leaves and grows in semi to deep shade. Tiny green flowers cover it in May. Care: rake away dead stems and add 1 cm compost in early spring.

Stonecrops and hens-and-chickens (*Sedum* sp. and *Sempervivum* sp. cultivars) – These have fleshy leaves and most will grow with very little water. Their different leaf forms and textures can be used in full sun to make an attractive mosaic or “Persian Carpet”. They are suitable for gentle slopes. Plant in groups in well drained soil. Care: remove dead stems. Most will be damaged by foot traffic, so add paving stones for pathways.

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) – This invasive plant grows well in full sun and partial shade with minimum nutrients or water. It may be used to replace grass in lawns as it will withstand heavy foot traffic (not for a playing surface, however). The fern-like leaves are aromatic. White or pink flowers attract butterflies. Care: mow every six weeks, with the blades set at 10 cm. Mow at longer intervals for flowers. Water only when plants look dull and distressed. Note: This plant is very difficult to remove.

Some other groundcovers to consider include:

- For dry shade – barrenwort (*Epimedium*), geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*), Japanese spurge (*Pachysandra*), Spotted bellflower (*Campanula punctata*)
- For damp, semi-shade to shade – bugleweed (*Ajuga*), dead nettle (*Lamium*), lily-of-the-valley (*Convullaria*), lungwort (*Pulmonaria*)