

Grassless Lawns

By Susan Camp

Last week I received a note from Celeste Dudley, who retired from writing the “Gardening Corner” column in August 2015. Celeste is as cheerful and feisty as ever. She included an article from the June 2017 issue of Coastal Virginia Magazine containing an interview with her long-time friend, Elizabeth Francis of Norfolk.

Ms. Francis is a retired teacher and Master Gardener who decided 20 years ago to replace her turfgrass lawn with seasonal bulbs, native perennials, shrubs, vines, and small trees, a process that took three years, but now requires minimal maintenance.

Celeste reminded me in her note that she has long advocated for a grassless yard, and for good reason. Tons of fertilizers-- especially nitrogen, pesticides, and herbicides are washed into the nation’s waterways every year, leading to water contamination, oxygen depletion, and wildlife demise.

The perfect, weed-free, velvety green lawn became part of the American suburban lifestyle during the economic boom following World War II. Dandelions, chickweed, and nut sedge became curse words as property owners slaved and sweated over their yards to claim the greenest grass on the street.

In recent years, Americans everywhere have begun, like Elizabeth Francis and Celeste Dudley, to rethink the turfgrass lawn and develop alternative yard plans. The concept of a grassless lawn is not welcome in some communities, so before you embark on a major shift to grass alternatives, you need to check homeowner association restrictions and town, city, or county ordinances related to the issue.

If you decide to decrease your lawn size, but want to keep some areas in grass, the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication (CSES-17NP) “2017-2018 Virginia Turfgrass Recommendations” contains the most current information on appropriate varieties to plant. Numerous VCE publications cover every topic or question that could arise on growing a healthy lawn.

The simplest way to decrease the area planted in grass is to decide how much lawn you really need and how much work you want to do to maintain a beautiful yard. Dig some new borders and beds and plant bulbs and native perennials. Develop garden “rooms” divided by shrubs or small trees, leaving compact grassy areas or narrow strips of lawn.

You can plant a grass alternative, an option that has gained popularity in recent years. For moist, shady areas, moss is a practical choice, because it is likely to appear on its own and it requires minimal maintenance. Hypnum and Thuidium spp. grow well in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 10. Moss never needs mowing, but it can’t handle heavy foot traffic, so you will have to provide a walkway through a moss lawn.

White Dutch clover (*Trifolium repens*) makes an attractive lawn in sun to part shade. Clover will grow in poor soil and can survive a pH range from 5.0 to 7.0 in USDA Zones 5 through 8.

Clover is a legume, so nitrogen stored in the root nodules will return to the soil as the plant dies, providing natural fertilizer. The sweet-scented white flowers attract bees, but clover can be mowed occasionally to eliminate the blossoms. Clover will handle some foot traffic, but, as with a moss lawn, a stone walkway will protect the plants from damage by children or dogs.

Mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus*) is an Asian native gaining popularity as a turfgrass alternative in USDA Zones 5 through 9. Mondo grass at six inches tall, or dwarf mondo grass, at two inches, grow well in part to full shade and will handle some foot traffic. Plant mondo grass plugs six inches apart and mulch between plugs to deter weed growth. Mondo grass is mowed once every spring.

Creeping lirioppe (*Liriope spicata*) sometimes called lilyturf, is recommended by some authors as a turfgrass alternative. An Asian native, it is aggressive and invasive, and will overtake other plants if not strictly contained. I do not recommend planting creeping lirioppe to replace turfgrass.

Growing less turfgrass helps the environment and gives us more time to enjoy the summer afternoons.

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