

Just Say 'No' to Grass!

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY CHERYL CORSON

Some people just have to have grass. They had it growing up, and now that they have their own homes, they are nostalgic for the look, feel, and smell of it. I'm talking, of course, about turf grass.

A Brief History

The American lawn has been analyzed, celebrated, and lamented by many. Its history dates to the 17th century in France with the tapis vert, or 'green carpet,' continuing in 18th century England with enormous greens intended to magnify owners' perception of their land holdings, and make a castle or chateau seem all the larger by surrounding it an unbroken green expanse.

Transported to 19th and early 20th century American suburban landscapes, contiguous, perfectly mowed, unfenced front lawns became visual shorthand for the status symbol spawned by their northern European predecessors. Along the way, the American lawn also became a symbol of civic virtue.

Miniaturized versions of the American lawn exist on Capitol Hill, where they perform some of the same aesthetic functions they always have: setting off the house and providing a soothing green ground plane against which showy garden trees, shrubs and perennials may be displayed. So what's the problem?

A Snake in the Grass

The problem is that contemporary lawn care is resource intensive and environmentally harmful. Our climate is not like England where lawns need no watering, and DC water is not free. Gasoline lawnmowers account for up to 10% of all pollution from mobile sources in the U.S., and grass needs to be cut. Taken to extremes, the image, or fantasy, of the perfect lawn excludes other plants, like dandelions, which many consider weeds. Although now we know that dandelions can help solve honeybee Colony Collapse Disorder because they are the earliest major source of spring nectar.

Lawn pests like grubs and cinch bugs

may be good food for moles and chickens, but are unwanted by most homeowners. Consequently, millions of unregulated gallons of fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides are poured onto American lawns every year.

While professional landscape contractors are licensed to purchase, apply, and store fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, homeowners are not. The substances purchased by homeowners are simply watered down versions of the same products used by professionals. And these substances cause problems in our rivers and the Chesapeake Bay by adding way too much Nitrogen and Phosphorus to the water.

A study released in March by the Environment Maryland Research and Policy Center stated that turf grass is Maryland's largest crop by a long shot, "more than twice the acres of the state's second biggest crop, corn." The study says that 30% of the Phosphorus and 10% of Nitrogen reaching the Chesapeake Bay is from urban and suburban lawn runoff. To be clean and sustainable, they say the Bay needs 30% less Nitrogen and 8% less Phosphorus than it now has. In addition, experts say that the environmental impact of organic and chemical fertilizer is the same.

What to Do Instead?

Fortunately, we can create the same aesthetic effect of grass with other plants that do not require regular watering, mowing or

fertilizing, rarely need weeding, and will tolerate moderate foot traffic. Furthermore, these plants flower, adding seasonal color and nectar for pollinators. Many of these lawn substitute plants are also evergreen.

I have successfully used two species of plants as lawn substitutes on Capitol Hill. One is called White Creeping Mazus, or Mazus reptans 'alba.' This plant is low to the ground, evergreen, and likes part shade and/or moist locations. It has white flowers in spring and forms a dense mat excluding most weeds. You can see this planting at 903 North Carolina Ave., SE. The client installed turf grass in 1999, and later became tired of the maintenance. About 100 Mazus in 4"



100 4" pots of Mazus reptans 'alba' are laid out for planting (September 2009)



Blooming together with the pink dogwood, the Mazus puts on a show (April 16, 2011)



Sedum one month after planting (May 2009)



Sedum is nice and green in April 2011

pots were planted in September 2009, and even after last year's hot summer, they have now formed a lovely surface, more interesting and much less maintenance-intensive than grass. The straight species of Mazus reptans has purple-blue flowers. Some people like to mix the two colors together, though I have heard that the blue spreads more slowly.

A lawn substitute plant I've used in sunnier locations is Sedum linare' Golden Teardrop.' This plant is bright green and has tiny yellow flowers in late spring. They bloom together with Globe Allium, making a fabulous display. They tolerate moderate foot traffic. In fact, at the Richmond wholesale nursery, Sandy's Plants, I saw where an 18-wheeler had run over it, and the sedum had barely noticed. In a garden near Union Station, I planted 60 gallon-pots of this sedum in April 2009 and within months it had formed a solid mat. This plant is draught tolerant and tough as nails. I have found it to be evergreen as well.

Resources

There are more lawn substitute plants out there. One excellent online resource is the Plant Finder at www.SandysPlants.com. Another resource is www.stepables.com. If you'd like to do a lawn substitute project yourself, either Frager's or Ginkgo Gardens will custom order the plants you need. If you'd like to read an engaging, scholarly book on grass, consult *The American Lawn*, Georges Teyssot, ed. If you need further convincing on the environmental consequences of American-style lawns, look at *Re-designing the American Lawn*, by Bormann, Balmori and Geballe, or read the March 2011 *Environment Maryland* study, *Urban Fertilizers and the Chesapeake Bay*, which is available online at no charge.

You can read these books with the extra time you'll spend not mowing your lawn.

Cheryl Corson is a landscape architect with over ten years of experience on the Hill. She helps create beautiful spaces that are good for people and the environment. www.cheryl-corson.com ★

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