

Going Grassless: Honey I Shrunk the Grass

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Summary Notes

1. A summary article on this talk can be found here:
<http://www.leevalley.com/US/newsletters/Gardening/2099//article2.pdf>
2. Goals of the Talk:
 - a. Explore the 'whys' to going grassless
 - b. Probe the history of the North American lawn
 - c. Share my own project going grassless
 - d. Look at some zone appropriate alternatives to turf grass
 - e. Sneak a peek at other grassless gardens
 - f. Wrap it up some pros and cons of going grassless
 - g. Share ideas and questions with a short interactive chat
3. Watering Recommendations from City of Ottawa website:
 - May: Water deeply 2.5 cm (1") every 7-10 days if necessary, in the early morning
 - June: Monitor and treat for: heat stress, insects and diseases
 - July: Water 0.5 cm (1/4-1/8") every few days or let the lawn go dormant (turn brown), don't cut until it recovers after a rain
 - August: Water deeply in the early morning, 2.5 cm (1 inch) every 7-10 days if a dormant lawn is not acceptable
 - September: Water deeply in the early morning, 2.5 cm (1 inch) every 7-10 days if there is no rain
4. The finances of turf grass:
 - Fertilizers
 - Spring and fall top dressing
 - A few bags of seed for bare areas
 - Aeration annually
 - Lawn mower, trimmer and weeding tools (with added costs, if needed, to hire someone)
 - Hoses, sprinklers, city water
 - A few rolls of sod to replace grass consumed by white grubs
 - Lawn care products including corn gluten meal (pesticides are banned in Ontario for residential use)
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5. Turf grass: costs in time
 - Time is precious for us 'weekend warriors'
 - Grass needs to be watered regularly, once or twice a week at peak growing times
 - Time for reseeding and daily watering
 - Time required for weeding, including dandelions picked by hand
 - Nematodes to deal with grubs

6. Environmental costs of grass:

- Essentially, grass is a water hog and a monoculture that discourages insect and plant diversity. Result= a boom in some bugs (i.e. grubs), a reduction in others (i.e. pollinators)
- Overuse of fertilizers seep into our sewers and into our water system
- Power lawn mowers belch smoke and contaminants into the air
- Grass gets thirsty often and doesn't conserve water
- For those who insist on using pesticides, there are added environmental risks

7. My own choice: Going Grassless

- Grass seemed more work, especially as we got older
- Grass cost time and money and seemed to contribute little back to nature
- Grass seemed a tad, well, boring, compared to the riotous bloom of perennials, shrubs, ornamental grasses and trees
- Going grassless would help to attract pollinators- birds, bees, butterflies and other beneficial insects

8. My garden goals:

- Create a garden design plan with minimal disruption to the existing beds
- Incorporate hard and softscaping on a shoestring budget without landscape designers, architects or expensive equipment, with the help of my husband
- Plant it with pollinator-friendly plants, tough, hardy and appropriate for our zone
- Complete the project in time for the MG potluck in early August

9. The Lasagna Method:

- Step One: Cover the grass with five or six sheets of newspaper to block out the sunlight
- Step Two: Apply three to four inches of good topsoil
- Step Three: Top with mulch to block out weed seeds
- Step Four: Water well and let it 'cook' in the hot sun

10. Design Principles for a Front Yard:

- Unlike a back yard, a front yard is shared with neighbours, pedestrians, cyclists and drivers
- Needs to be interesting from a variety of angles
- Height challenges
- Respect city bylaws, including safety for passersby
- Hot, dry, conditions with the need for sun-loving plants

11. My sun-loving pollinator plants:

- Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa* 'Hello Yellow')
- Sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*)
- Dwarf calamint (*Calamintha nepeta ssp.nepeta* 'Blue Cloud')
- Dwarf delphinium (*Delphinium grandiflorum* 'Summer Stars')
- Dwarf obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana* 'Crystal Peak White')

12. My sun-loving plant choices:

- Roses- Lower growing ones including Drift and Carpet Roses
- Grasses- Gold Sedge (Carex elata Bowles Golden), Variegated Purple Moor Grass (Molina coerulea 'Variegata')
- Herbs- Used sun-loving Mediterranean herbs including lavender, oregano, varieties of sage and thyme
- Groundcovers- sedums, creeping phlox and sandwort and groundcover shrubs
- Tall and short trees and shrubs

13. Planting after using the lasagna method:

- Once the grass has started to decompose, it's possible to cut through the layers to plant new perennials
- Mulch and water well until the plants take root
- Don't mulch too close to the base of the plants. Leave room for aeration and watering.
- Result: an 'instant' garden
- Note: Won't work as successfully for seeds

14. Musings on going grassless:

- Be careful what and how you plant. Sometimes plants can be more labour intensive than grass.
- Smaller lots are much easier when going grassless than larger lots.
- Plants seem more satisfying and interesting for gardeners and nature lovers.
- Depending on how you create the garden, it can get expensive, especially if garden designers and landscaping companies get involved.
- It may or may not add value to your home.

15. Just Food: Benefits of an edible front yard garden

- "Productive use of lawn space...diverts water from grass into something that can be eaten"
- "A very safe and healthy way to grow nutritious food..."
- "In many circumstances, there is more sunlight in the front yard...better conditions for growing plants."
- Can be used as a way to start conversations with neighbours and passers-by
- "Enhances biodiversity and attracts pollinators"

And more reasons...

16. The pros of going grassless

- 1. It's good for nature and biodiversity, helping out the birds, bees and butterflies.
- 2. It's more fun and satisfying for those of us who love to garden
- 3. It can be beautiful, with that 'WOW' effect for passersby.
- 4. It's social with potential to let you get to know your neighbours.
- 5. It's quiet, reduces noise i.e. a lawnmower starting just as you sit down a BBQ with friends

17. The cons of going grassless:

- 1. It's not going to work for you or your partner really loves grass.
- 2. It can be expensive if you hire a company or don't know your plants.
- 3. There is a risk of getting into trouble with Ottawa bylaws. Be careful.
- 4. Going grassless can be controversial. Neighbours might be upset.
- 5. It involves some work. (Note: What is work to one person can be play to someone else.) On second thought, grass is lots of work too.

18. Suggested references:

SUGGESTED REFERENCES

Lawn Gone! Low-Maintenance, Sustainable, Attractive Alternatives for Your Yard

by Pam Penick, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, 2013

Front Yard Gardens, Growing More Than Grass by Liz Primeau, Firefly Books Ltd.
2003

Just Food at www.justfood.ca