

ON THE WILD SIDE

Explore alternatives to lawns

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You are probably hearing a lot about “sustainable gardening” these days. You may wonder what it means – it does sound pretty serious. Think about it as maintaining your yard in an environmentally friendly way.

I suppose the first question you might ask is “why”? or “what’s in it for me”? There are several answers to these questions, and you may be able to come up with others yourself by the end of the article.

A friend recently sent me an email with an imaginary conversation between God and Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals and the environment. God is pretty confused about lawns and St. Francis has a bit of trouble explaining why folks replace meadows with grass that needs lots of water and fertilizer to grow so that they can cut it down and throw it away. Here’s a link to read the whole conversation — www.comptechdoc.org/humor/garden/.

Green mowed lawns were not always a part of the US landscape. It wasn’t until the end of the 19th century and the development of lawn mowers and sprinklers that lawns began to be popular. Local contests for beautiful lawns spread their popularity in the 20th century. In 2000, one poll reported that more than 26 million households hired a green professional to maintain their lawns.

Now I am not anti-lawn. It is wonderful to have a place to play pick-up ball, use the Slip-and-Slide, play badminton or just run around. But reducing lawn areas



PHOTO BY CHARLENE A. McNEIL

A hummingbird circles a flower. Wild Backyards of Norton, sponsored by the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton, is working to have 150 households in Norton certified as wildlife habitats.

can have a big impact on the environment. Lawns often require chemical treatment (including chemicals that require little flags to warn you to stay off). These chemicals may end up as polluted runoff into water supplies.

Lawns provide little food for local wildlife, and mowing with a gas-powered mower contributes about 5 percent of air pollution. So consider setting aside some areas with native wildflower, bushes, trees, and native decorative grasses. Less mowing, better for the environment.

For more information on lawns start with <http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife/Gardening-Tips/Cut-Your-Lawn-In-Half.aspx>.

Another thing to consider is switching to a more environmentally friendly way to maintain your lawn. Organic products are available as fertilizer, and these reduce toxic run-off. You might also want to consider greening things like clover as helpful to the lawn (they “fix” nitrogen in the soil and make it available to other plants) and reducing the use of herbicides.

You might also try gradually replacing your grass with new low maintenance drought tolerant grasses that have been developed. They are slow growing and require little or no mowing. For more information, check out <http://www.extension.umn.edu/yardandgarden/ygbriefs/h325lawn-lowmaint.html>.

Reducing water use: xeriscaping

This has been a hot dry summer in southeastern Massachusetts. There are ways to landscape your property to reduce water use – helpful during “no lawn sprinkling” days in Norton. The Trinitarian Congregational Church at the corner of Pine Street and Route 123 has developed and is maintaining a xeriscaped garden on the Pine Street side of the church. Visit it to see a lovely garden space with plants that require little or no supplementary watering. As the garden matures, the weeding has also become less onerous.

Along with xeriscaping, mulching is an important part of an environmentally friendly garden. Overuse of water drops the water table and impacts wildlife that may be miles away. Low water disrupts marsh, stream and river life, including fish, heron, otter and many others.

Mulches do two things: they help retain water in the soil and improve soil quality.

Newspapers, leaves, bark, and wood chips all make good mulches.

Native plants are a good choice for your yard. They are well adapted to the area and require little maintenance and they attract native animals. Good sites to visit to learn about native plants are the National Wildlife Federation site, the Native Plant Database, and the New England Wildflower Society. A simple search will give you lots of options.

So, what is in it for you?

- Reducing lawn chemicals provides a safer place for children to play.
- Reducing the amount of lawn saves time, energy and money and also reduces lawnmower exhaust pollution.
- Reducing water use through plantings and mulching gives you a beautiful yard even during the “no lawn sprinkler” days.
- There is much less work for you once the new yard and gardens are established.
- You can be happy knowing that you are doing something to preserve our natural environment for future generations.

Taking a few of these steps will help you qualify your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat. For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website: <http://www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx>

For local information, see the Land Preservation Society of Norton website: <http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org/>

Linda S. Kollett is a member of the Land Preservation Society of Norton and of the Wild Backyards of Norton Team. Wild Backyards of Norton, sponsored by the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton, is working to have 150 households in Norton certified as wildlife habitats with the ultimate goal of having Norton recognized as a Community Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. Please join us by certifying your own wild backyard. For more information about Wild Backyards of Norton contact Kathy Ebert-Zawasky at zawasky@comcast.net