Roll Back Your Turf

How to reduce your lawn and choose native plants that work

—Jane Roy Brown, Writer-Editor, and Alexis Doshas, Nasami Farm Nursery Manager
Since our story “Your Lawn Is Killing Us” appeared in these pages in 2017, the lawn-alternative groundswell has gained momentum.

During the COVID pandemic, the “kill your lawn” idea caught a wave in the mainstream media, from the New York Times (2022) and the Boston Globe (2020, 2022) to the Washington Post (2023) and Men’s Journal (2020)—which notably ran its “kill your lawn” story in the “Adventure” section.

Because the point of rolling back turf grass is to make room for native plants, the trend reveals how many people are grasping the importance of native plants. But in the post-lawn moment, many of us struggle with how to replace their turf grass, says Nasami Farm Nursery Manager Alexis Doshas.

“People are eager to do the right thing, but it can be hard to reimagine a space that has been the same for a long time,” says Doshas, who, in her popular lecture Native Lawn Alternatives, has been guiding people through the transition from turf desert to habitat garden for seven years. “And if someone is just getting acquainted with native plants, they don’t know what’s out there and how the plants will work on their site.” This can be true even for experienced gardeners who are used to working with exotic plants, she says.

If you fall into any of these categories, you’re in luck, because Doshas has graciously agreed to share the key takeaways from her class here.
How to leave your lawn behind

TALK TO THE NEIGHBORS
The biggest reason why most of us cling to our lawns is because we fear what the neighbors will say. But they might change their minds when you explain why you’re minimizing your turf. Start with 30,000 tons of pesticides applied annually to your view. You for walks, converting a European intensive farm crop is sweet corn, at 2.5 pounds of fertilizer an acre. In Massachusetts alone, lawn services apply 5 to 7 pounds of fertilizer per acre of turf grass. Mowing produces air pollution, and homeowners also spill more gas a year (17 million gallons) than the oil spewn from the Exxon Valdez. And as climate change brings more frequent droughts, we need to squeeze the spigot on the lawn, which now accounts for up to 60 percent of residential water use. Finally, if you are a bee or a firefly, a lawn is the habitat equivalent of a rock. Make that a poison rock.

TACKLE IT IN STAGES
Converting your entire lawn into a native plant garden at once can be overwhelming. Instead, tackle one area at a time. Start at the edges: Create garden borders around trees and along walks, driveways, and the house. Hard-to-mow slopes are ripe for replanting with native shrubs and groundcovers.

KEEP A PATCH OF TURF
You may no longer need to maintain an open field for a clear view of the enemy advancing toward your castle, but maybe your kids want a place to kick a soccer ball around, or your family enjoys sitting out in lawn chairs to watch fireflies.

CHOOSE HOW TO KILL YOUR GRASS
Herbicides are available, but we suggest other methods, in order of preference:

- Sheet mulch, laying down corrugated cardboard in thick layers, adding compost, straw, leaves, etc. Start it in fall, and it’s ready to plant in spring.
- Just stop mowing and spot-treat or dig out weeds; overseed with perennial wildflowers and/or dig in seedlings or plugs.
- Dig out grass with a sod cutter, fork, and shovel. Take care not to lose soil clinging to the roots.
- Solarize with clear plastic to bake the roots and weed seeds. But this also kills soil organisms.

LEARN YOUR SITE CONDITIONS
The sunlight, soil type, and moisture levels of the site you have chosen for your first lawn-alternative bed will determine which plants will do well. See sidebar.

REPLACE TURF WITH NATIVE PLANTS
This is the post-lawn strategy. Native plants provide critical habitat for native pollinators and wildlife. When properly sited, they don’t need fertilizer and irrigation, because they are adapted to New England’s climate, soil, water, and ecology. They help to establish a unique sense of place. They are stunningly beautiful. Check, check, check, and check. But where to begin the transition from lawn to gardens? This is where lots of us get stuck.
| **THREE-TOOTHED-CINQUEFOIL**  
(Sibbaldiopsis tridentata) | **BLUE-EYED-GRASS**  
(Sisyrinchium angustifolium) | **STONECROP SEDUM**  
(Sedum ternatum) |
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<td>Spring bloom, evergreen, fall color, fruit, attracts bees and other pollinators, compaction tolerant, drought tolerant, deer and rabbit resistant.</td>
<td>Spring bloom, fall/winter fruit, attracts bees and other pollinators, attracts songbirds, low maintenance.</td>
<td>Spring bloom, attracts bees and other pollinators, host plant, attracts songbirds, drought tolerant, low maintenance, edible.</td>
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| • Height: 4”–6”  
• Spreading 8”–18”  
• Light: sun  
• Moisture: dry soil | • Height: 6”–18”  
• Spreading: 6”–8”  
• Light: sun–part shade  
• Moisture: average–wet soil | • Height: 4”–8”  
• Spreading 8”–12”  
• Light: sun–part shade  
• Moisture: average–dry soil |

| **PUSSYTOES**  
(Antennaria neglecta) | **BEARBERRY OR KINNICKINICK**  
(Arctostaphylos uva ursi) | **RUNNING FOAM FLOWER**  
(Tiarella cordifolia v. cordifolia) |
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<td>Spring bloom, attracts bees and other pollinators, host plant, attracts songbirds, drought tolerant, low maintenance, edible.</td>
<td>Spring bloom, summer fruit, fall foliage, evergreen, attracts songbirds, bees, and other pollinators, deer and rabbit resistant, salt and drought tolerant.</td>
<td>Spring bloom, attracts bees and other pollinators, host plant, suitable for urban environments, deer and rabbit resistant, low maintenance.</td>
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| • Height: 1”–3”  
• Spreading 6”–12”  
• Light: sun–part shade  
• Moisture: average–dry soil | • Height: 3”–6”  
• Spreading 2”–3”  
• Light: sun  
• Moisture: average–dry soil | • Height: 3”–12”  
• Spreading: 12”–24”  
• Light: part shade–shade  
• Moisture: average |
Right plant, right place

Your site conditions are your primary guide in picking the right plants, but choices still abound, so don’t feel bad if you find yourself on a hamster wheel of indecision. After all, the more plants you know, the more plants you love. To get off the dime, see these suggestions from Alexis Doshas.

**PENNSYLVANIA SEDGE**
*Carex pensylvanica*
Pollinator powerhouse, host plant, suitable for urban environments, deer and rabbit resistant, most turf-like aesthetic.
- Height: 8”–10”
- Spreads by rhizome
- Light: sun–part shade
- Moisture: average–dry soil

**APPALACHIAN SEDGE**
*Carex appalachica*
Pollinator powerhouse, host plant, deer and rabbit resistant.
- Height: 8”–10”
- Clump spread: 10”–14”
- Light: sun–part shade
- Moisture: average–dry soil

**PURPLE LOVE GRASS**
*Eragrostis spectabilis*
Drought tolerant, suitable for urban environments, salt tolerant, deer and rabbit resistant, summer bloom, low maintenance.
- Height: 8”–14”
- Clump spread: 10”–16”
- Light: sun–part shade
- Moisture: dry–average soil

**WAVY HAIR GRASS**
*Deschampsia flexuosa*
Salt tolerant; summer bloom; host plant; neat habit; thin leaves; arching, delicate flower spikes; semi-evergreen.
- Height: 24–36” (flower)
- Clump spread: 12”–24”
- Light: part shade–shade
- Moisture: average soil

**LITTLE BLUESTEM**
*Schizachyrium scoparium*
Fall foliage, attracts wildlife, host plant, salt and drought tolerant, deer and rabbit resistant, low maintenance.
- Height: 12”–48”
- Clump spread: 8”–24”
- Light: sun–part shade
- Moisture: average–dry soil

**COMMON STRAWBERRY**
*Fragaria virginiana*
Spring bloom, summer fruit, fall foliage, attracts songbirds, pollinator powerhouse, host plant, salt and drought tolerant, deer and rabbit resistant, low maintenance.
- Height: 2”–5”
- Spreading 12”–24”
- Light: sun–part shade
- Moisture: average–dry soil
**WILD BLUE PHLOX**  
(*Phlox divaricata*)  
Spring bloom, attracts bees, attracts butterflies and other pollinators, host plant, low maintenance, fragrant.  
- Height: 10”–14”  
- Spreading: 12”–16”  
- Light: part shade–shade  
- Moisture: average

**WILD GINGER**  
(*Asarum canadense*)  
Spring bloom, attracts pollinators, deer and rabbit resistant.  
- Height: 3”–6”  
- Spreading: 12”–16”  
- Light: sun–part shade  
- Moisture: wet-average

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**LOCATE YOUR HARDINESS ZONE**  
Enter “2024 USDA Hardiness Zone Map” in your browser’s search field. (If you haven’t checked your zone recently, you might see differences in the 2024 map.) Find the zone where you live. When you buy plants, check the hardiness zone on the label. Choose plants hardy to the next full or half-zone lower than the one you live in.

**HAND-TEST YOUR SOIL TYPE**  
Rub a small amount of moist soil between your fingers. If it feels coarse and gritty, the soil is predominantly sand. Smooth and velvety? It is most likely silt. If it clings together and feels sticky, it is largely clay. Next, squeeze a moist soil clod in your hand. If the clod doesn’t crumble or change shape, it is likely heavy clay. If the clod breaks into particles, it is predominantly sand. Loam soils tend to stay together when squeezed and change shape easily.

Clay soils require plants that can withstand wet or flooded conditions. For sandy soils, pick plants that are adapted to dry, nutrient-poor soils. For loam, or relatively even concentrations of sand, silt, and clay, get plants for average soil.

**CHECK YOUR SUNLIGHT**  
This is what the light requirements on your plant labels mean:  
- Full sun = more than six hours of direct sunlight a day  
- Part shade = three to six hours of sunlight a day  
- Full shade = less than three hours of direct sunlight a day

**MONITOR MOISTURE**  
Note markedly wet or dry areas of your yard, especially places that stay wet for hours or days after rain. These extreme areas require plants adapted to those conditions.