Alternatives to Lawns
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It is sometimes desirable to reduce lawn areas, especially when an acceptable turf grass stand cannot be maintained without a great deal of expense or work. Conditions may also be more favorable for other plants, such as dense shade or dry slopes where grass may have difficulty maintaining a dense cover. A lawn is not like a garden that can be tilled over easily and started anew when things turn out badly. Areas that chronically fail to produce an acceptable grass may need to be converted into something else.

Sunny area with sandy soil with ornamental grasses, Russian sage, Hydrangea and lavender. Pamm Cooper photo.

If shade is preventing grass from filling in or even establishing, consider using those areas as shade gardens. There are both native and non-native shrubs and herbaceous perennials, as well as annual plants such as coleus that will provide a more appealing look than a weak, thin turf. There are many native and non-native perennial flowers that also do well in shade conditions. Tiarella, asters, astilbe, bleeding heart, foxglove, and lily-of-the-valley do well in shade conditions and provide a splash of color. Jack-in-the-pulpit, ferns, trillium and May apples also do well in shade or dappled shade.

Shade with vinca as a groundcover, hostas, and ferns. P. Cooper photo.
Consider raking leaves over grass along a wood line in the fall where grass is not doing well. In the spring, plant native witch hazel, flowering dogwood, mountain laurel or Pinxter azalea that are native trees and shrubs that do well in shade conditions, especially along borders of wood lines. Adding a few non-spreading ferns like the maidenhair, ostrich or cinnamon ferns plus adding some native wildflowers like Geranium maculatum and Solomon’s seal will give it a more natural look.

If sunny or dry soils are the problem and watering is not possible or use of water is restricted or prohibitive, try drought tolerant, sun loving annual or perennial plants. If the area needs to be prepared by roto- tilling, work in some organic matter at that time, if necessary. Some drought tolerant annuals are zinnias, cosmos, celosia, and sunflowers. Drought tolerant perennials include Baptisia, phlox, perovskia (Russian sage), salvia (Salvia farinacea), black-eyed Susan (Rudbeckia) and sedums are just a few. Shrubs for full sun include Hydrangea paniculata, butterfly bush, mock orange (Philadelphus coronarius), fothergilla (Fothergilla major) and Japanese flowering quince.

Steep slopes present problems with water retention. Unless modified with some organic matter, plant selection should focus on those that can deal well with soils that may be dry for much of the summer. Sheep fescue (Festuca ovina) and some other ornamental grasses can be planted with Russian sage, black-eyed-Susan and purple coneflower (Echinacea) in areas that have full sun and drier soils.

Slope with no lawn. P. Cooper photo.

Creeping juniper (Juniperus horizontalis) is a low- growing evergreen shrub that will tolerate poor soils and will creep over time to 8-10 feet wide and get one to two feet high. Savin juniper (Juniperus sabina) spreads to ten feet, but is taller: three feet. It also has a more delicate color. Fragrant sumac (Rhus aromatic) grows 2-6 feet and has an attractive fall color. There are also R. rilobata, R. glabra, and R. typhina which should also do well. Daylilies do well in full sun in dry conditions, as do the fragrant Carolina and Virginia roses- Rosa carolina and Rosa virginiana, respectively.

Make sure that you understand the needs of the plants you may be considering as a replacement for turf, as you don’t want to go from one problem to another. Selection of plants should be based on both existing soil and light conditions. An added benefit of converting a lawn to a landscape or garden is that birds, bees and other creatures may be provided with more food and shelter from the new plantings than they were with the lawn. It may also be nice not to have to mow so much.

If you need more suggestions for lawn alternatives or any other gardening query, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (toll-free) at (877) 486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu, or get in touch with your local Cooperative Extension Center.