



LAWN ALTERNATIVES

Lynn Lorenson, Nevada County Master Gardener

From *The Curious Gardener*, Summer 2008

Green, weed free lawns did not exist in the US until the late 18th century. Travelers to Europe, especially England, were taken by the new Palladian (classical Roman) style of architecture and the surrounding landscape. A grassy sward of *enameled meads* sloped away from these imposing mansions. These broad expanses of grass and flowers were mowed by an army of gardeners wielding scythes or by sheep. The U.S. White house is an example of this concept.

Before the late 18th century rural gardens consisted of packed earth and small flowerbeds. The only way to irrigate was by carrying water in a bucket.

Golf drove the development of the modern lawn. The USDA along with the U.S. Golf Association collaborated to develop the right combination of grasses suitable to a variety of climates found in the U.S.

Mowing the lawn was still beyond most home gardeners. The choice was between sheep in the meadow or an army of laborers.

The reel mower, developed by an English engineer, Edwin Budding, was an adaptation of a machine used in cloth factories for cutting the nap on velvet. The Saturday routine of mowing the lawn had started.

Lawns did not appear in the dryer parts of the U.S. until the invention of the garden hose and sprinkler. The green, weed-free lawn was yet to take the pride of place in the front garden. The American Garden Club began to promote this landscape concept through contests.

The garden club set the standard as "*a plot with a single type of grass with no intruding weeds, kept mown at a height of an inch and a half, uniformly green, and neatly edged.*" Meeting this standard had the unintended consequences of pollution from pesticides to control the weeds and groundwater pollution from fertilizer use. Powered lawn mowers add air pollution.

Ecological concerns have spurred the California gardener to consider alternatives to the high-input turf grass so common across the U.S. Many home gardeners want a low-growing, grass-like area where children can play. With careful selection and a change in standards, "we can have it all." The new American *lawn* uses native grasses and grass-like plants or walk on ground covers.

Sun Loving, Turf-Type species for the Sierra Nevada Foothills

Bentgrass (*Agrostis pallens*) This is a fine bladed, soft to walk on, warm season grass that spread by rhizomes. Plant in late spring for a spectacular summer show. It will out compete weeds the next year. Bi-monthly irrigation will keep it green. One mowing during mid season will keep it looking turf-like.

Red fescue (*Festuca rubra* 'Molate')

You can have it your way with this fine-bladed fescue. Leave unmowed and the seedheads can reach 2 feet. Or, for a turf look, mow 2 inches high. This cool-season grass needs monthly irrigation to remain green throughout the summer and fall.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

The University of California, in accordance with applicable Federal and State law and University policy, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, medical condition (cancer-related), ancestry, marital status, citizenship, sexual orientation, or status as a Vietnam-era veteran or special disabled veteran. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin, 6th Floor, Oakland, California 94607-5200. (510) 987-0096. United States Department of Agriculture, University of California, Placer & Nevada Counties cooperating.

NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu

California Oatgrass (*Danthonia californica*)

This low growing bunch grass makes an almost turf-like groundcover. It prefers some summer irrigation, but can go completely dry. Monthly mowing promotes a turf-like growth.

Slender Sedge (*Carex praeracilis*)

Slender sedge is a grass-like plant that has a wide range. It is summer green. It handles mowing well or can be allowed to flop down creating a low, mounding or hummocky look. This is a more inland species similar to dune sedge (*Carex pansa*).

Buffalograss (*Buchloe dactyloides*)

Buffalo grass is native to the Great Plains and Great Basin. This warm-season grass is completely dormant during cold weather. However in the summer it provides low growing turf grass that takes little water. In many areas of the foothills it will be necessary to add calcium to promote strong growth. This grass spreads by seed and stolons. It can be mowed or left unmowed.

Sun Loving, Walk on Ground Covers

You can have it all, flowers and a low-growing walk on surface. Broad leaf plants offer surprising alternatives to the traditional turf.

Common Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) makes a practical alternative to a lawn. Keep it green by irrigating twice monthly during the hottest part of the summer. Mow once per month for a turflike look. Leave the edges unmowed for a display of flowers in white, pink, salmon or red.

Woolly Yarrow (*A. tomentosa*) forms a flat, spreading mat of blue-green, hairy leaves. Unmowed, flowers rise on 6 to 10 inch stems in yellow and cream. This variety does well in partially shaded areas.

Pair Plants with Pavers

Reduce turf areas by installing pavers. A checkerboard lawn looks fine with less frequent mowing. Other broadleaf plants that are less tolerant to foot traffic will thrive with strategically positioned pavers or stepping stones.

Thymes

Ground hugging thymes take a surprising amount of foot traffic. Choose low growing varieties.

Creeping Thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) This thyme is mostly evergreen, growing 1 to 4 inches tall. Purple through red flower color.

Choices for Filtered Shade

The following groundcovers are less tolerant to foot traffic. They present the soft green look of turf without all the input.

Blue Star Creeper (*Laurentia fluviatilis*) Weekly irrigation keeps this groundcover performing well.

Irish & Scotch Moss (*Sagina subulata and Arenaria verna caespitosa*) These moss look-alikes are best used in small areas or between pavers and stepping stones. Weekly irrigation is needed.

Creeping Clover (*Trifolium repens 'Autopurpureum'*) can be grown in light shade or full sun, and is drought tolerant. Twice monthly irrigation is needed in the hottest summer months. This low growing clover makes a nice contrast to green plants with its deep red leaves.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

The University of California, in accordance with applicable Federal and State law and University policy, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, medical condition (cancer-related), ancestry, marital status, citizenship, sexual orientation, or status as a Vietnam-era veteran or special disabled veteran. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin, 6th Floor, Oakland, California 94607-5200. (510) 987-0096. United States Department of Agriculture, University of California, Placer & Nevada Counties cooperating.

NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn
Grass Valley, CA 95945
(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu

Deep Shade

Moss is only choice to growing in deep shade. Stepping stones are needed here, as moss does not stand up to foot traffic. If moss is not already present, look to collect moss that grows on the ground rather than on tree trunks or rocks. To propagate, gather the moss and allow to dry completely. Grind the moss with a mortar and pestle. Sprinkle the "moss powder" on the ground and dampen. Keep the area damp, not wet and soon moss will begin to grow.

Lawn alternatives fill many growing conditions. Fit the planting to the function. Keeping mud out of the house is better met with alternatives to turf. Reducing or removing traditional turf grass lessens the impact on the environment, the wallet and frees up time for leisure.

References

Easy Lawns. Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Steve Daniels Editor. Science Press 1999.

www.landscape-america.com/history/history_lawn.html

Sunset Western Garden Book. Sunset Publishing 2005.

The Garden. Howard Loxton. Key Porter Books 1991.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



PLACER COUNTY

11477 E Avenue
Auburn, CA 95603

(530) 889-7385

E-Mail: ceplacer@ucdavis.edu

The University of California, in accordance with applicable Federal and State law and University policy, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, medical condition (cancer-related), ancestry, marital status, citizenship, sexual orientation, or status as a Vietnam-era veteran or special disabled veteran. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin, 6th Floor, Oakland, California 94607-5200. (510) 987-0096. United States Department of Agriculture, University of California, Placer & Nevada Counties cooperating.

NEVADA COUNTY

255 So Auburn
Grass Valley, CA 95945

(530) 273-4563

E-Mail: cenevada@ucdavis.edu

Placer County Hotline: (530) 889-7388. Visit us online at <http://pcmg.ucanr.org>