



PHOTO BY ROBIN CUSHMAN

Guilt-Free Turf

Try a less than perfect lawn.

Did you let your lawn dry out and turn brown this summer? If so, now would be a good time to water it. Once the grass has greened up again, feed it with an organic lawn fertilizer. Fall feeding encourages grass to develop a good, deep root system, ensuring a strong come-back next spring and greater resistance to summer drought.

Lawns have come in for some very bad press in recent years. All through the 1990s, writers such as Michael Pollen and Sara Stein dedicated themselves to curing Americans of the lawn habit, and they made some good arguments in the process. Turfgrass offers severely limited habitat for wild things, and lawn care can be time-consuming, water-guzzling, toxic and polluting. But in order to make their case appear stronger, critics always stress the environmental costs of a *perfect* lawn, with little or no discussion of the most obvious and easily realized alternative: a lawn that is less than perfect.

The environmental costs of a lawn are greatly reduced as soon as you eliminate the herbicides, excessive fertilization and heavy watering that are needed to maintain a lush, weed-free, emerald green turf, and even an imperfect lawn does things that nothing else can. Mown grass is tough and self-repairing. It is also cool, soft and clean, so you can sit on it and even roll in it. If you accept the argument that the purely visual pleasures we derive from lawns (as a foil for flower beds and trees, or as a canvas for changing light and shadows) are culturally induced, maybe you can learn to live without them. But many home gardens have a real, practical need for some inviting surface that is soft yet durable enough to withstand play and foot traffic.

In a place like western Oregon, where grass grows so readily, an organically maintained lawn, weeded by hand (or not at all) and cut with a push mower, is inexpensive by any measure and it does a nice job of preventing erosion and preserving and even improving soil quality. Perhaps we should be questioning the size of our lawns and the type of turf we grow, rather than the whole concept of mown grass.

A turf of mixed grasses and broad-leafed

plants lessens the urge to weed, eliminates thatch and increases drought resistance. Nichols Garden Nursery of Albany sells "ecology lawn mixes" tailored for different regions of the country. They are not, of course, tailored for your particular soil, moisture and light conditions. My own lawn was seeded seven years ago with the usual mix of perennial rye-grass and fescues, but it has evolved into a sort of custom eco-mix of air-borne grasses, prunella, clover, cowslip primroses and violets. We weed out dandelions by hand because they would take over if we didn't. The lawn looks a little uneven when it's due for a cut, but it responds very well to mowing.

Because its area is small in comparison to the surrounding perennial beds, we water our lawn in summer. This year it developed some brown patches where water failed to penetrate the heavy, easily compacted soil. Aeration and a top-dressing of mixed sand and compost would probably take care of that. Insect infestations can cause brown patches, too, but so far bugs have not bothered us. Insect and disease troubles are apparently less common in lawns maintained organically. Besides, there is strength in diversity: if one component suffers, something else moves in to take its place.

What is the formula for a guilt-free patch of turf? Start new lawns from seed. Reduce the size of the lawn so you can hand-weed it, and ignore weeds that seem to coexist with grass. If you like, you can over-sow with white clover (1/2 pound per 1,000 square feet is recommended). Clover is deep-rooting and drought resistant, and fixes nitrogen from the air. Gas-powered mowers are shocking polluters, so if you can't manage a push-mower, use an electric one. Cut high, especially in summer, and leave clippings where they fall. Water deeply and infrequently, just enough to keep the lawn green, or simply let the turf go dormant. Letting grass turn brown in summer won't kill it, although it will give dandelions an edge. Crispy brown grass will not withstand foot traffic, however, so stay off the lawn until it comes back to life.

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