Creative Ways to Reduce Your Lawn

Photo by David Copps: Consider reducing your lawn by planting a variety of shrubs, trees, wildflowers, native grasses, and groundcovers.

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Are you tired of spending precious weekend time on lawn maintenance chores? If so, consider reducing the size of your lawn by incorporating some natural habitat patches into your landscape. You'll have more leisure time, reduce pollution by using less fuel, fertilizers, and pesticides, and attract more wildlife to your yard.

Create a mini-woodland under a large shade tree or group of trees where you’ve had trouble maintaining turf grass. When leaves fall, let them remain on the ground to build up a rich carpet of mulch. Into the newly mulched area, plant a variety of understory trees, shrubs, and groundcovers to create a multi-layered woodland structure. More layers provide more feeding and nesting opportunities for songbirds and other wildlife. Well-mulched ground also serves as an excellent sponge, soaking up stormwater run-off and storing it for future use by thirsty trees.

Increase the width of hedges on the borders of your property by planting a row of fruiting shrubs in front of tall evergreens. Elderberry, beautyberry, winged sumac and blueberry provide much needed high-energy wildlife food for much of the year.

Create thickets in the back corners of your yard to provide shrubby cover that is so important for songbirds and other critters. A combination of cherry laurel, red cedar, yaupon holly and wax myrtle, laced through with vines like yellow jessamine and cross vine, provides thick cover needed to escape predators and harsh winter winds.
Provide a patch of meadow with native grasses and wildflowers. Purple-top, broomsedge, and fakahatchee grass mixed with narrow-leaf sunflower, blazing star, mist flower and goldenrod enhance the landscape with forms, colors and textures of foliage and flowers that change throughout the year. The activities of the songbirds and butterflies that are attracted to this habitat enliven the meadow and add to its appeal.

When combined in borders and islands, mixtures of grasses and wildflowers can be combined with areas of turf to create interesting mosaics of tall and short patches that are fun to walk through. Children especially enjoy roaming and exploring along paths that are cut through the taller vegetation.

Another conservation solution for reducing the amount of lawn is to create rain gardens. These are shallow depressions designed to catch the first inch or so of surface water that flows from your roof, sidewalk and driveway during a rain storm. This first flush of stormwater carries the most pollutants. A rain garden holds this water, allowing it to be absorbed and filtered into the ground rather than rushing into the public stormwater system to be dumped in nearby water bodies. When planted with tough native plants that can withstand periodic flooding, rain gardens make beautiful additions to the landscape. Visit the City of Tallahassee’s Think About Personal Pollution Program (TAPP) webpage at http://www.tappwater.org/raingardens.aspx for information about rain garden design, construction and planting.

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