





# LETTING GO OF THE LAWN

Story and Photos by Alan Kettler

If you like landscaping and gardening, letting go of the lawn could be one of your next new creative ventures in the yard that is included with your house. The typical homeowner who buys a house with any land typically acquires 100% grassy lawn area, minus a few trees and shrub plantings.

Taking care of these lawns is a major national pastime and the object of great amounts of money, time, and energy. Weeding, feeding, mowing, and watering – isn't there a better way to spend a Saturday afternoon? What about creative alternatives to the lawn to make it smaller, easier to maintain and also more interesting? This article will take a look at some ideas and concepts that you can incorporate into your home landscape.

I met with Kate Lacouture, a landscape architect in Providence who specializes in advocating and designing outdoor residential spaces that reduce or minimize turfgrass area. Not quite knowing what to expect, a visit to her back yard opened up a whole new way of thinking for me. Only about 10% of the ground was covered in lawn.

"It was practically impossible to grow any grass under our big Norway maple. Shady conditions like this are common for many people," said Kate. As I looked around the yard, it was full of variety and very alive looking, even with very little grass. There was stone paving, potted plants, shrubs and ground cover, and a small wooden rowboat floating on a sea of chunky wood chips.

"The woodchips work really good for us because we have three kids and a dog. The kids have no interest in the lawn – the only one around here who is drawn to the grass is the dog." Kate designs her paved areas to be really warm, interesting, and alive. "Paving doesn't have to be cold and sterile." She uses Plumbago and especially Ajuga to add plant life to nooks and crannies throughout the yard and stone work.

*Left: Kate's front lawn is now a garden including an eclectic mix of many kinds of plants, including herbs, perennial flowers, vegetables, small shrubs and trees, including a pear tree on the far left.*





As a landscape designer I have spent years replacing the grass in my yard by digging it up and replacing it with a wide mix of plants. Kate encourages the same practice – decreasing the lawn area by planting a blend of shrubs, perennials, herbs, fruit trees, vegetables, strawberries, blueberries, and lots of self sowing annuals. This was her design for her front yard, smaller and sunnier than the back.

It was an explosion of beautiful and interesting plants. The remaining lawn area, smaller than my station wagon, provided plenty of space to sit down and talk.

#### KATE'S RECIPE FOR TAKING OUT THE LAWN –

The only thing I DON'T like about removing grass is the hard labor involved in digging it up. Kate has a better technique that is much easier on the back:

- Put down a thin layer of newspaper (a few sheets thick) over your grass in the fall.
- Cover that with a couple inches of compost.
- Top it off with mulch to make it look good and hold the compost in place.
- Finally, next spring, just dig holes through the paper and start planting.

“People tend to use their back yards more than their front yards because they have more privacy. Front lawns are mostly for show – people don't hang out in their front yards.” Because of this, she especially encourages replacing the front lawn or decreasing the size of it with other plants. I do recall, years ago, when I lived on a suburban cul de sac, I never saw any of my neighbors out front, except to mow the grass – all the barbecues and kids' play areas were out back.

According to Kate, the front lawn turned garden has a whole array of benefits – practical, aesthetic, and even social. “My front garden is less maintenance than a lawn, even with all the different plants. Also, watching the garden emerge in spring is a lot more exciting than watching the lawn turn a brighter shade of green.”

Like this writer, Kate installs and maintains her gardens organically. “Using chemicals in my gardens is just not an option,” says Kate with the true conviction of a dedicated organic gardener. “If my clients have pest problems in their gardens, I recommend nontoxic alternatives. A healthy well balanced garden environment generally does not have pest problems, and if a plant doesn't make it for some reason, I let it go and there are plenty of other great plants for the garden.”

“Also, the garden attracts lots of bird life and bug life, including praying mantises. It's like having our own little patch of wild life, which you wouldn't get with a conventional lawn. The animals and the neighborhood kids love it.” Sure enough, minutes later, a small girl walking by stopped to admire and touch the unusual dried seedheads of a plant called Teasel.

Kate says that a lot of people stop by (sidewalk out front) to look at her garden. People are curious about the different kinds of plants and some people even thank her for planting such a beautiful and unusual garden that they can enjoy as they walk by.

Some people might be too timid to start replacing their lawn with gardens. Historically, many people have actually been harassed by neighbors or local politics for doing this. And, of course, to any homeowner, the classic question remains, “What will the neighbors think?” I asked Kate if people ever complain about her yard turned garden. “No – in fact, I've gotten an incredibly positive response about the garden.”

On that note, there are truly good reasons to reconsider having all that grass in your yard. If you want to get started, you could take Kate's advice. “One of the best ways to learn is to just start working on your yard – start small and work your way up.”

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