

## Homes & Real estate

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Originally published Friday, May 17, 2013 at 8:00 PM

### Green, green grass of home

Tailor your lawn to your lifestyle by taking advantage of the many innovative options available for lawn care and lawn alternatives.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

#### Ecoconsumer

A lawn of lush, green grass was once a badge of honor for a homeowner.

Then came the backlash. Many of us, especially in the Seattle area, eventually rejected the idea that the American dream needs to include a pristine expanse of lawn.

But you don't have to be a lawn lover or hater. If a lawn comes with your house, think of it as a blank canvas. Tailor your lawn to your lifestyle by taking advantage of the many innovative options available for lawn care and lawn alternatives. You'll also reduce time spent on yard care, and minimize your lawn's environmental footprint.

#### Cut to size

In her new book "Lawn Gone! Low-Maintenance, Sustainable, Attractive Alternatives for Your Yard," Texas-based author Pam Penick recommends reducing your lawn to a size that serves a specific purpose.

For example, keep a lawn in the backyard where children or pets can play, but remove the grass in your front yard and parking strip. If you don't have kids or pets and you don't play croquet, you might not need a lawn at all.

Our region has been a leader in the growing trend of replacing grass in the front yard with edible crops such as vegetables and berries. If you prefer ornamental plants, consider using Northwest natives, since they tolerate our summer dry season better than other plants.

The "Lawn Gone!" book includes plant recommendations by region, with choices for the Pacific Northwest selected by Seattle garden designer and writer Christina Salwitz. For durable, lawn-replacing ground covers that form a mat, she suggests blue star creeper, woolly thyme, creeping mazus and Irish or Scotch moss.

#### No drugs

The biggest problem with American lawns since the 1950s has been their chemical dependence. Among 30 commonly used lawn pesticides, 24 are toxic to fish and other aquatic life, 23 have the ability to leach into drinking water sources, 17 are detected in groundwater, 16 are toxic to birds and 11 are deadly to bees, according to the national nonprofit group Beyond Pesticides.

Learn to tolerate weeds in the lawn or remove them by hand. Various nonchemical solutions are available at local nurseries or online. For example, you can combat crane flies and fleas by spraying microscopic, larvae-killing, live nematodes on your lawn by the millions.

Chemical lawn fertilizers wash into lakes, streams and Puget Sound, and are mostly unnecessary. “Grasscycling,” or leaving grass clippings on the lawn when you mow, provides nutrients and helps your soil retain water. It also saves you the time and trouble of bagging the clippings.

Overwatering your lawn is another habit you should break. Provide your lawn with just 1 inch of water a week in summer, including rain, to keep it green, advises Seattle Public Utilities. Place tuna cans or cat food cans around the yard to measure the water.

If you have areas of grass that aren’t regularly used, let them go brown during the dry season. They’ll bounce back in the fall.

King County residents with questions about sustainable lawn care can contact the [Garden Hotline](#) at 206-633-0224.

### **Mow it green**

As you help your lawn kick its addictions, don’t forget about the gasoline in your mower. Offering an alternative to environmentally unfriendly gas-powered mowers, a cordless electric mower such as the Toro E-Cycler costs \$350 to \$500. That may seem pricey, but the convenience and savings on avoided gas purchases should be well worth it.

If you have a small, relatively flat lawn, consider a nonmotorized push mower, also known as a reel mower. The Fiskars StaySharp Max reel mower, at about \$200, has an unusual design that propels the grass trimmings in front of the mower. It’s easier to push than other reel mowers, and the blades rarely need sharpening.

If you do still use a gas mower, get it tuned up if you haven’t already. Regular tuneups reduce a mower’s environmental impact and prolong its life.

There’s an old saying: “You don’t own your lawn; your lawn owns you.” The best part about maintaining your lawn more sustainably or reducing its size is that you really will own your lawn.

*Tom Watson is project manager for King County’s Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at [tom.watson@kingcounty.gov](mailto:tom.watson@kingcounty.gov), 206-296-4481 or [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com)*