# Lawn Alternatives

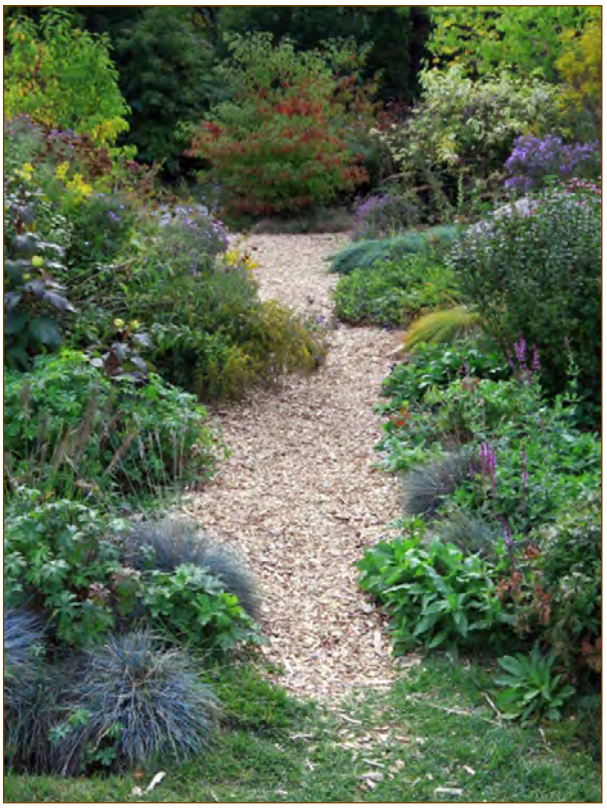
*There are a spectacular variety of attractive, easy-to-maintain alternatives* to replace unwanted or problem lawns. Follow these steps to create lawn alternatives that improve your site, reduce your work, and save resources:

- **Step 1: Consider your alternatives.**
- **Step 2: Create gardens that match your needs and resources.**
- **Step 3: Recycle your lawn.**
- **Step 4: Plan(t) for less work.**

## Why Replace Your Lawn?

People choose to replace lawns with other plantings or surfaces for many reasons:

- **Create more varied and productive landscapes** including colorful flowers and foliage, shade, privacy, wildlife habitat, and other benefits.
- **Replace hard to maintain problem lawns** in steep, shady, or difficult to access areas, and on poorly drained or compacted soil.
- **Reduce work and resource use** by growing plants that need less water, fertilizer, pesticides, and labor than lawns.
- **Use materials that wear better than lawns** for paths, work, play, or entertainment areas.
- **Leave a natural buffer next to lakes and streams** to filter out pollutants, provide food and shade for fish, and prevent bank erosion.



## 1. Consider Your Alternatives

A truly low-maintenance garden must match your site conditions and resources. The questions and chart on the next page will help you unearth practical lawn alternatives. The *Garden Design* guide has more detailed directions for designing new garden areas.



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### What Do You Have?

**Growing Conditions:** A careful assessment of the area will help you choose plants that thrive in each spot. Note sunny and shady areas, steep slopes, poor soil, wet and dry spots, and places that are hard to access.

**Resources:** Think about the time and money you want to commit to removing and replacing lawn areas. It's smart to start with a small area—even low maintenance plantings take work to plant and establish.

**Existing Soil:** Even most tough plants need several inches of loose soil to flourish. The old lawn can be a valuable source of organic matter to nourish the new plantings. See Step 3 and the *Soil* guide to evaluate and improve your soil.

**Water:** Is there a water source nearby? Even drought tolerant plants need water for a few years to get established.

### What Do You Want?

**Spaces and Uses:** What do you want new plants or other features to do for you? Consider screens for privacy or wind protection, access paths, flower displays, wildlife habitat, and work and play areas.

**Maintenance:** How much maintenance can you provide? Shade trees, shrubs, and evergreen ground covers usually need less care than flowering perennials, fruit trees, or berries.

## Low-Maintenance Alternatives to Lawns

| Conditions | Possible Alternatives |
|---|---|
|  Sunny exposed areas | Drought tolerant trees, shrubs, ground covers, and perennials.<br>"EcoLawn" or meadow mixes of low grasses and flowering herbs.<br>Fruit trees or berries with mulch and weed barrier. |
|  Deep shade | Drought tolerant trees, shrubs, ground covers, and perennials. |
|  Poorly drained areas | Native wetland and other moisture loving trees, shrubs, ground covers, and perennials. |
|  Steep slopes | Evergreen ground covers and shrubs.<br>Terraces with drought tolerant plants. |
|  Paths and play areas | Stepping-stones or pavers with matting ground covers.<br>Wood chip or crushed gravel on top of weed barrier.<br>Recycled rubber mats under play equipment. |
|  Work and entertaining areas | Wood or plastic-lumber decks.<br>Ornamental pavers with gravel or ground covers.<br>Wood chip or crushed gravel on top of weed barrier. |
|  Limited access or water | Drought tolerant plants appropriate to conditions.<br>Gravel on top of weed barrier, with limited plantings or art. |

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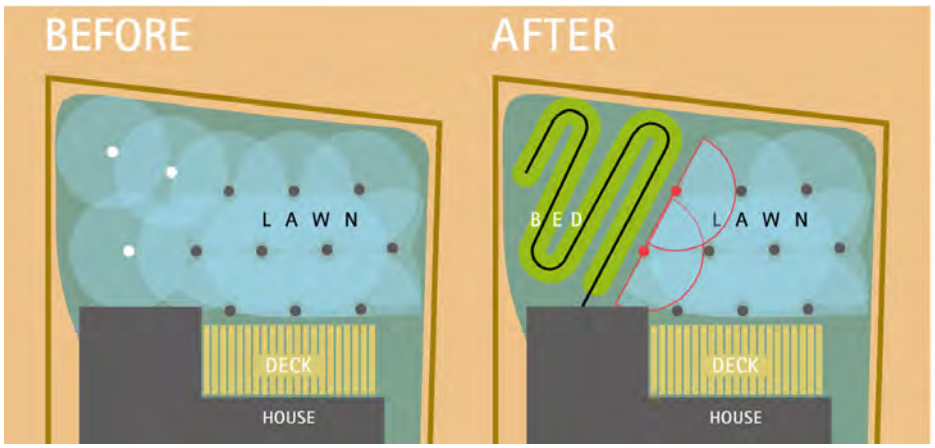



## CHANGE IRRIGATION TO MATCH REDUCED LAWN AREA

- SPRINKLER HEADS TO BE REMOVED FROM NEW PLANT BED
- SPRINKLER HEADS CONVERTED TO SPRAY 1/2 CIRCLE PATTERN
- UNCHANGED SPRINKLER HEADS
- DRIP OR SOAKER HOSE

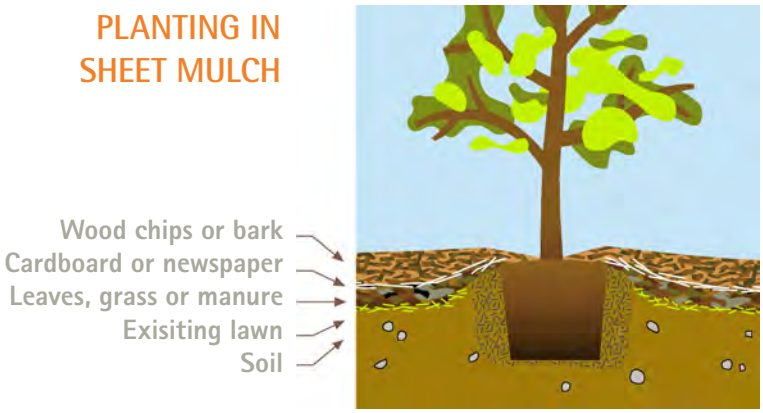
## 2. Create Gardens That Match Your Needs and Resources

Combining site conditions with your desires and resources is the key to creating successful gardens. Every garden and gardener is unique, but some important design tips that can help keep water and maintenance to a minimum include:

**Plan so new plantings can be irrigated separately from lawns.** If you water with hose-end sprinklers, replace lawn around the edges of the yard—not islands in the middle—to leave an area of grass that can be watered separately. Replace sections of lawn aligned with rows of installed sprinklers so they can be redirected to create separate lawn zones.

**Use evergreen shrubs and groundcovers to reduce maintenance and water needs.** Evergreens shade out weeds better than deciduous plants, need less pruning than perennials, and most need no watering after a few years. Group perennials that need to be cut back each winter into easy to maintain clusters.

## PLANTING IN SHEET MULCH




## 3. Recycle Your Lawn

**Old lawns are a valuable source of organic material to nourish new plantings.** Reusing the sod saves time and the expense of disposal and importing new soil amendments. Options for reusing your old lawn include:

**Strip and stack.** Power sod strippers cut sod into easy to lift sections that can be piled to make compost or planting berms. Simply stack moistened sod in a pile, cover it with black plastic, and let it decompose for a year. The finished compost can be used to amend garden beds, or shaped into a low planting berm.

**Smother with sheet mulch.** Lawns can be smothered with layers of cardboard or paper covered with compost, stable manure, wood chips, ground bark, or other materials to build new soil. See the *Mulch* guide for more details. It can take several months for the old sod to decompose, though shrubs and trees can be planted in holes in the mulch sooner. Plastic film can be used to smother grasses and weeds that spread by roots, but the plastic must be removed when finished so air and water can reach the soil.

**Rototill.** Heavy-duty rototillers can mix lawns into the soil, though it may take several passes. Grasses that spread by roots will resprout and need to be removed by hand picking or spot sprayed with herbicide.

The low-growing herb *Thymus x citriodorus* 'Gold Stream' brightens paths and borders with aromatic foliage and delicate flowers.

## 4. Plan(t) for Less Work

Even the toughest plants require some care to become established, and most will need to be watered for a few years. Native and Mediterranean plants may never need water if planted in small sizes in early fall and heavily mulched. Smart planning can minimize these needs and help make your garden a low-maintenance success:

**Mulch to control weeds, conserve water, and feed plants.** Shrubs and trees thrive with 2-3 inch thick layers of long-lasting mulches such as ground bark or wood chips from arborists. Ground covers and perennials prefer a 1-2 inch mulch of compost or aged bark. A layer of cardboard or porous landscape fabric under mulch helps control weeds. See the *Mulch* guide for more information.

**Use soaker hoses or drip irrigation to water.** Most plants need summer watering for the first 2-3 years in the garden to become established. Drip irrigation or soaker hoses buried under mulch are the easiest and most efficient way to water. They use half as much water as sprinklers, are easier than dragging hoses and sprinklers around, and help reduce weeds. See the *Drip and Soak* guide for details.

## RESOURCES

**Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website**
www.bellevuewa.gov/naturalyardcare.htm

**Bellevue's *Natural Gardening Guides***
*Composting Food Scraps* • *Composting Yard Trimmings* • *Drip and Soak* • *Fertilizer* • *Garden Design* • *Lawn Alternatives* • *Lawns* • *Mulch* • *Pests, Weeds, and Diseases* • *Plant Right* • *Seasonal Calendar* • *Soil* • *Watering*
**For copies,** visit Bellevue's Natural Lawn and Garden website *(above)* or call Bellevue Utilities at 425-452-6932.

**Natural Yard Care Neighborhoods**
www.naturalyardcare.info

**The Garden Hotline**
www.gardenhotline.org or 206-633-0224

**WSU Extension Rain Gardens**
http://ext100.wsu.edu/raingarden

**Grow Smart, Grow Safe**
www.growsmartgrowsafe.org

**Bellevue Botanical Garden Collection Search**
http://bbgcollection.bellevuewa.gov

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