

Lawnless on Long Island

Who would dare create a lawnless landscape? Or at least one where lawn is subordinate to other landscape elements? Up until recently, and even to an extent today, this would be labeled as heresy. Why is this, given that there are so many benefits to doing so? (See our '*Cover your Ground*' for a detailed discussion on the benefits of groundcovers).

The precedent in this country for lawn dominated landscapes is well established. The original American suburbs, built after the Civil War, were designed with closely cut grass flowing unimpeded from one property into another. Other landscape elements were subordinated to the lawn. In the 1870 edition of The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds, Frank J. Scott wrote "Let your lawn be your home's velvet robe, and your flowers its not too promiscuous decoration". Even today, this design approach continues to dominate the suburban landscape.

There has always been room for trees, shrubs and other perennials, of course. But, trees would typically be found in lawns. Shrub borders would typically be surrounded or fronted by lawns. Perennial borders would typically be set apart as an island in a sea of lawn. It was all about the lawn. Lawn was, and still is, king. Just about everyone has it whether it is useful or not. And God help those who failed to mow their lawn in a timely fashion lest they face the wrath of the entire neighborhood!

I am not suggesting a no mow approach to lawn maintenance. I am suggesting to take an honest assessment of your lawn areas. Where is it useful and where is it not? Keep it where it is useful then set out to replace it everywhere else.

When Joanne and I bought our first house we immediately began to transform our front yard into a front garden. The overgrown shrub foundation planting was removed, as was about four-fifths of the lawngrass. We even removed the lawngrass in the planting strip between the sidewalk and the street. It was replaced with mixed plantings dominated by herbaceous perennials with some shrubs and small trees for structure. Plants were installed a little bit at a time (busman's holiday!), and we noticed a significant reduction in weeding as areas fill in. That, I would contend, is a primary goal of perennial gardening: covering your ground! Once good coverage is established, maintaining your garden is no more time consuming (and quite possibly less) than mowing your lawn weekly. Warning: this approach can be addictive! Due to its ability to offer so much more beauty, and provide a constantly changing landscape through the seasons, one may be compelled to spend extra time in the garden.

Although I do not think our neighbors "got it" when we first set out to change our property, we eventually got driveby slowdowns and walkers stopping to admire our little oasis on a street otherwise dominated by lawn. Perhaps this is the greatest benefit of all to converting lawns into gardens – sharing the beauty with your neighbors.