



TURF ALTERNATIVE

Ah, the American lawn. It's a long honored tradition that has its roots dating back to the French and English garden styles of the last 18th century. Hi, I'm Steve with the Regional Water Providers Consortium and today we're going to talk about turf. Today you can take a look around any community in the United States and it's quite clear that the tradition has held strong. It's not difficult to understand why.

When planted with thoughtful design, turf grass lawns can provide a pleasant aesthetic or practical or enjoyable functionality. We use turf to retain eroding slopes, as a natural surface for athletic fields, and of course to create pleasant spaces to recreate and relax with friends, family, and pets just to name a few. Obviously turf has its place.

However, and you knew this was coming, right? I would like to humbly submit that our perception of turf grass as a necessity in many cases has outgrown its practicality. That the ubiquitous traditional turf lawn may not always be the best planting option if one considers the real cost and leisure time, money, natural resources, and the environmental degradation that can result from the overplanting of turf in our landscapes. I would further suggest, that we have available to our selection a myriad of alternatives to turf that can reduce the cost associated with lawn maintenance. In essence, do we consider if the functionality of our turf areas justify the real cost to maintain them? If so, fantastic, go for it. If not, consider alternative plantings to turf. And consider this, if it takes you an hour to mow your lawn and you do so weekly, you'll devote at least 24 hours per growing season to mowing the lawn. For every hour it takes, that's another day of vacation. And who couldn't use another day of vacation? Also, depending on your location in Oregon, landscape irrigation accounts for 25%-50% of potable water consumption.

The first step in creating a thoughtfully designed landscape is to carefully consider the opportunities and constraints presented by your space. Think about the desired function of your landscape. What do you expect to get out of it? Do you need a space that will accommodate a lot of traffic, a variety of users, and activities, pets, kids? Well perhaps turf is the appropriate selection for you. But I can hear the questions now. Steve, what are the alternatives?

Many folks say they want a low maintenance landscape that won't cost a fortune to install and maintain nor have a negative impact on the environment. Actually, people now also want a landscape that will enhance environmental quality and improve the habitat. So is all this possible? Absolutely. Here are a few examples of turf alternatives and some great reasons why you should consider using them in your landscape.

Trees and shrubs provide dramatic impact to the way we experience a landscape. Both trees and shrubs are available in virtually limitless sizes, shapes, and colors of blooms. Many varieties of each have interesting characteristics throughout the year, such as colorful blossoms in spring, lush foliage in summer, fruit in early fall, and bark and branch patterns in the winter. Once established, trees and shrubs generally require much less water than a lawn and in some cases no supplemental irrigation is required after the roots are deeply set.

Trees and shrubs add structure and definition to a landscape and can greatly enhance the habitat for local wildlife.

Groundcovers also come in wide variety of textures and colors. Some groundcovers also have interesting features like flowers and berries. Like trees and shrubs, once groundcovers are established they will require much less water than a lawn. Some groundcovers can actually be planted in a way that will mimic the appearance of a traditional turf lawn without the typical maintenance requirements. Another great thing about groundcovers is that in many cases they're capable of tolerating foot traffic.

Another popular alternative to turf has been the emergence of lawn seed mixes used for areas that typically have been dedicated to turf grass. In general, alternative lawn seed mixes contain low growing, drought tolerant plant varieties that require less mowing and irrigation once established. In one mix, dwarf perennial grass seed is combined with English daisies, low growing clover, and dwarf yarrow to produce a colorful, interesting, and more sustainable turf. Herbal mixes include plants like chamomile, alyssum, and other herbaceous plants that release a pleasant fragrance when walked on or after mowing. For a more typical lawn appearance without the traditional cost, dwarf grass seed mixes provide that turf look and tend to be very durable, requiring much less mowing, fertilizing, and supplemental irrigation.

I hope this information has been helpful for you and I also hope that the next time you step out into your landscape, you can ask yourself, "Am I spending too much in time, work, and money, and feeling stressed out rather than satisfied by my year?" If so, you may want to consider a turf grass alternative.

I'm Steve Carper with the Regional Water Providers Consortium out standing in my field of alternative turf grass.

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