

# Sustainable Alternative Lawns

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The suburban lawn is a potent symbol of the American dream, and many people can't even imagine a home landscape without one. Despite the lush appearance of a wide, green lawn, lawns have some serious ecological effects.

Turfgrass is a monoculture that covers more than [three times](#) as much area as any food crop in the United States. Maintaining that massive monoculture results in pollution and health risks from fertilizing and weed-killing [chemicals](#) and [mowers](#), and uses nearly [one-third](#) of all residential water.

Reducing or eliminating your grass lawn is the most sustainable choice. But if the alternatives to a lawn don't work for your situation, you might be able to grow an alternative lawn.

## Traditional Lawn

A lawn is defined as “an area of short mown grass.” A traditional lawn achieves a uniform look by using one or more similar turfgrass species.

Any narrow-leaved grass species that tolerate foot traffic and low mowing heights can be a turfgrass. The popular species for a particular region depends on climatic, soil, and light conditions. In the U.S., these are the most common varieties of bluegrass, ryegrass, and fescue. Bermuda grasses grow in warmer parts of the country.

## Alternative Lawns

Many [alternatives to lawn](#), like low-growing ground covers and meadow grasses, are marketed as alternative lawns. Meadows are mostly grass, and some [ground covers](#), like chamomile, can be mowed. But strictly speaking, an alternative lawn would be a mowable mix of ground-cover species (including grasses) that can tolerate some foot traffic. Mixes that do not contain grass may also be called herbal lawns.

Oregon State University developed some of the first alternative lawns. They contained a mixture of lawn grasses and low-growing, drought-resistant broadleaf plants. [These mixes](#) served the same function — providing an open, flat space for walking and playing — in the landscape as a traditional lawn. They were low maintenance — requiring mowing every three weeks and water only once or twice per season. And they were sustainable — receiving no fertilizer or pesticide over a multi-year test period. They make a sustainable alternative to traditional lawn, but do not provide the tidy appearance of a golf course.

## Alternative Lawns Options

Today, there are a few commercially available herbal lawn and alternative lawn mixes from companies like [Pro Times](#) and [Sunmark](#).

Gardeners can also experiment with making their own mixes using [guidelines](#) developed by OSU. Whether you use a commercial or home-blended mix, you can adjust the composition by over-seeding with new species each year.

## **Watch the Law**

Whether you want to plant an alternative to lawn or an alternative lawn, check your local codes and homeowner's association rules.

Despite the environmental benefits of eliminating turf, many communities have surprisingly strict — and specific — [regulations](#) requiring traditional lawns. Before you plant, you might have to engage in some community activism. But you might also get lucky — many communities, especially in [California](#) and the Southwest, have incentive programs to reward homeowners who grow anything but grass.

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