Lose the Lawn

A Workshop Presented by Sussex County Master Gardeners 10/18/2025

Turf grass makes up more than 40 million acres in the USA, providing little value to the ecosystem. Care and management of turf grass is expensive and time consuming. Studies show that bees, birds, and other pollinators continue to decline due to loss of habitat, use of pesticides, etc. Increasing habitat using native plants is critical to stop this decline. Sussex County Master Gardeners will review and provide examples of steps homeowners can take to reduce turf grass, add beauty and interest to yards and gardens while helping the pollinators we depend upon.

The movement to lose the lawn

(from The Fossil Guy blog The history and origins of the American Lawn: A Call for Change)

A Cultural Shift

"The lawn culture that began in the 1940s is deeply embedded in American society, but it's time for change. By challenging the norms and embracing native landscapes, we can redefine what it means to care for our environment. Rewilding does not mean an unkept landscape and it is not a simple gardening trend; it's a movement toward sustainability, resilience, and coexistence with nature. The green square of conformity has no place in the vibrant and diverse future we need to build."

Identifying areas of opportunity in your landscape

For example, large areas that are not often utilized can be broken up by adding garden beds that may include shrubs, trees, grasses, and perennials.

- Expansion of an existing garden bed may be an option
- Linking single-planted trees with a garden bed of shrubs and perennials
- Expansion of tree mulch areas to let the leaves stay where they fall, adding perennial plantings
- Moist areas may be a good spot for a garden bed with plants that will soak up water
- Replace poor performing turf with a garden bed
- Surround a patio with a four-foot garden bed to include shrubs and perennials

PART ONE Create your Garden Plan

1. **Consider your budget** Review the time and money you have available for installation and maintenance. Your garden doesn't need to be completed in one phase. Many gardeners add new garden areas incrementally, especially if they have modest budgets.
2. **Decide when you want to install your garden** - spring or fall
    a. Fall planting advantages: Starting a native garden in the fall is beneficial because plants develop stronger root systems with less stress from heat, weeds, and pests, requiring less maintenance and watering.
    b. Spring planting advantages: A larger variety of plants are available in nurseries and online and at native plant sales. Spring is the time to plant warm season grasses.
3. **Study your site** -Note sun, shade, soil type, drainage and soil moisture**.** Pollinator gardens generally require full sun - 6+ hours per day.

a. **Do a soil test** - Available through the University of Delaware Cooperative Ext. It also helps to understand the type of soil you have – not so that you can amend it, but rather to help you choose plants that will do well for you without requiring a lot of alterations to your environment.
b. **Determine other features**:
    i. Dry and wet areas of the landscape
    ii. Is soil compaction a problem?
    iii. Do you have irrigation? Is there a water source nearby (hose bib)?

4. Study your neighborhood and consider what design elements would look great in your community.
    a. **Be an ambassador** of native gardening to your neighbors by designing a garden that looks intentional, that has good edges and other cues of care. Consider signage to communicate the importance of native plants to others.
    b. Get inspiration from other garden designs specific to your region.
    c. Consider the scale of your plants. In suburban gardens, keep herbaceous flowering plants no taller than 3-4.
5. **Determine the exact dimensions** of your garden and get permission from your HOA, if needed.
6. Are there **deer or rabbits** present in your landscape? If you have deer, select deer tolerant plants or consider fencing; if you have rabbits, you will need a fence to protect your plants. If children or animals have access, avoid poisonous plants.
7. **Develop a plant** list that meets the conditions in your garden (ex. sun, drought tolerant, 3' or less)
    a. In selecting native pollinator plants and warm season grasses for your garden, try to create a mix that blooms from spring through the summer and into fall. Include plants of different heights, including ground covers, to allow for layering.
    b. Make a big list (a grocery list) with several plants that can serve the same purpose. This will allow for substitutions when certain plants are not available.
    c. Lists of native plants can be found on the National Wildlife Federation Plant Finder website and at https://www.gardenia.net/native-plants/delaware.
    d. Draw your plan on paper, determine how many plants you will need.
        i. Ignore spacing recommendations and use mature size instead. Your native garden should be densely planted to reduce weed pressure.
        ii. Plan to buy 3 or more of each.
8. Decide whether you want to use **full grown nursery plants** or native **plant plugs - not seeds**
    a. Plugs are seedlings that are typically less than a year old and have developed a strong, deep root system within a small, individual cell of a plug tray.
    b. Plugs are cost effective, easy to install, and best planted in the spring.
    c. Plugs require patience. While some mature quickly others can take 2-3 years to mature.
    d. Full grown nursery plants can be expensive!
9. **Make a list of nurseries (physical or online)** to visit to purchase your native plants and take advantage of native plant sales.
    a. Plugs are available online at
        i. Izel Native Plants - https://www.izelplants.com/
        ii. New Moon Nursery **-** https://newmoonnursery.com/our-availablity/
        iii. North Creek Nurseries - https://www.northcreeknurseries.com/page/Availability
        iv. Prairie Moon Nursery (preplanned gardens & mixed flats) – https://www.prairiemoon.com
        v. Prairie Nursery (mix and match flats) - https://www.prairienursery.com/
        vi. My Home Park (pre-planned gardens, seeds, plugs) https://www.myhomepark.com/

b. For larger plants, try
    i. Blooming Meadow Nursery | Plants | Dagsboro, DE, USA (best prices and online availability list)
    ii. Inland Bays Nursery **-** Home | Inland Bays Garden Center in Frankford

PART TWO: Preparing your garden plot for planting

1. **Get rid of your turf**
    a. **Sod cutting** - by hand or machine, get rid of the sod - fastest method for planting in spring or fall
    b. **Solarization** - Solarization is the process of placing a clear plastic tarp over an area to heat up the soil underneath. By blocking access to water and heating up the soil, the process eventually kills the vegetation underneath. Start in July or August and mow the grass as short as possible. Cover with tarps and leave them in place until September. Use this method for planting in the fall.
    c. **Smothering**: This method, also known as sheet mulching or lasagna gardening, Mow the grass as short as possible. Lay down a thick layer of overlapping newspaper or cardboard directly on the mowed grass. Wetting the paper helps hold it in place. Cover the paper with several inches (4-6 inches or more) of organic material like compost, grass clippings, leaves, or wood chips. Use bricks, stones, or other heavy objects to weigh down the edges and prevent it from blowing away. Leave the cover in place for two to three months, or longer if you are dealing with hardy grass, allowing the grass to decompose. Once the turf has died, you can plant directly into the organic-rich soil underneath. This method takes 3-5 months.
2. **Prepare your garden bed**
    a. Don't amend the soil!
    b. Loosen the native soil to 6-12"
    c. If you want a raised bed, use a 50/50 mix of regular soil and leaf compost

PART THREE: Planting

Purchase your plants, put them in your garden, put up your fence, and put up your sign.

- **Create layers**: Mimic natural ecosystems by planting in layers, with ground covers in front, mid-sized plants in the middle, and taller species in the background.
- **Develop a focal point**: Create a central point of interest using a bold-textured plant or a garden feature, such as a bird bath or a small structure.
- **Incorporate steppingstones** so you can access your plantings for maintenance.
- **Consider adding plant ID markers** to help you remember what is in your garden (and what should not be). ID markers are a helpful and educational addition for visitors, especially those interested in starting their own native gardens!
- **Add wildlife features** like bird baths, mason bee boxes, or birdhouses.
- **Plant in drifts of the same species**, leaving enough room for plants to reach their mature size.
- **Fill in spaces** between plants the first year or two with **pollinator friendly annuals** such as zinnias, cosmos, salvias, and lantanas.
- **Give your planting bed a clean edge** to serve as a frame that accents your planting.
- **Mulch** your plants with an inch or more of **leaf compost** - **do not use landscape fabric**
- **Put up your sign!**

PART FOUR: Caring for your garden - keep it beautiful

Watering:

- **Water deeply** for the first week to a few times a week, ensuring the water reaches the roots. Note that **plugs need to be checked daily** - don't let them dry out!
    - Check soil moisture: Stick your finger into the soil about an inch down. If it feels dry, it's time to water again.
- Taper off: **Gradually reduce watering frequency** as plants become established, typically after about six weeks.
- Once established, **monitor for water needs**: Established plants are generally more self-sufficient, but they still need water during prolonged dry spells.
    - Signs of thirst: Look for signs of wilting, yellowing, or drying leaves at the base of plants, which indicate a need for water.
- **Be aware of conditions**: Water more frequently during hot weather or periods of drought to prevent stress on your plants.

Weeding:

- **Try not to disturb the soil**. Soil disturbance will invite more weeds.
- New weed seedlings are easiest to eliminate - they are small and easy to pull out.
- Established weeds (larger, perennial weeds like dandelions, etc.) and can be eliminated by continually cutting them off at ground level to starve them of light and food.
- Densely planted gardens are designed to deter weeds.

Fall clean-up

- Keep in mind 2 opposite ideas:
    - Your garden needs to be as tidy as others in your neighborhood (because you are an ambassador!).
    - Wildlife will benefit most if you let seed heads, plant stalks, and leaf litter remain.
- Make your decisions based on how visible your garden is to the public and what you think your neighbors can tolerate.

Other thoughts

- Get your property certified through the National Wildlife Foundation Certify Wildlife Habitat or Wild Ones Certified Native Habitat Program - Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes.
- Get on the map with HNP - Homegrown National Park - Regenerate Biodiversity.

Additional links

- Home Grown National Park - https://gardenforwildlife.com/collections/buy-all-native-plants-online-garden-for-wildlife. Search based on soil, moisture, light etc. to find native plants that fit. Use as a resource to develop plant lists and plants are also available for purchase. There is a wealth of information on the site including tips on working with homeowners' associations to gain approval for plantings.
- Native Plants for Delaware Landscapes - listing of native plants for Delaware.
- Mt. Cuba Center - https://mtcubacenter.org/index.php?s=perenn&post_type=plants. A resource for developing a plant list, and plant sales.
- Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center - https://www.wildflower.org/plants/. A resource for developing a plant list.