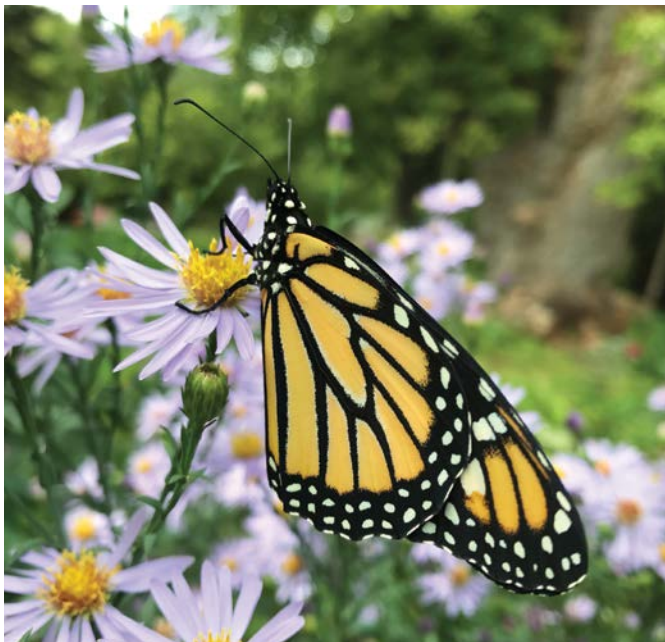




Less Lawn for a Healthier Minnetonka

What's the most widespread irrigated crop in the United States? It's not corn or soybeans, rice or alfalfa - in fact, it's not a plant that anyone eats.



The answer is... lawn! Lots and lots of lawn. The grass we grow in our yards, on golf courses and in parks covers about 40 million acres of the continental U.S. That's almost twice the land area used to raise our top food crops.

Lawns emerged in eighteenth-century Britain as a signal of wealth and aristocracy, available only to those with enough property and laborers to maintain this demanding crop. In the U.S., lawns became popular barely a century ago. As Americans gained more leisure time, they began to think of yards as an extension of their homes. Kitchen gardens and swept dirt were replaced with lawn to allow outdoor dining, socializing and play. Soon, a velvety green swathe of lawn became the preferred way to show prosperity and civic pride.

Today, priorities are shifting again. Many homeowners want a more naturalistic yard, reducing or removing grass in favor of landscaping that requires less maintenance and offers more benefits for people and the environment. Why does this matter, and how can you achieve it? Read on to find out!



What's the problem with lawn?

Let's face it: Healthy lawn is hard to come by. Kentucky bluegrass and other turf varieties originated in northern Europe, Africa and Asia - climates very different from ours. In the twentieth century, a whole industry emerged to support turf maintenance. New technologies improved mowing, irrigation, fertilizing, and control of weeds and pests. The result? Green grass - but also less natural diversity, a suite of environmental impacts, and a never-ending need for maintenance.



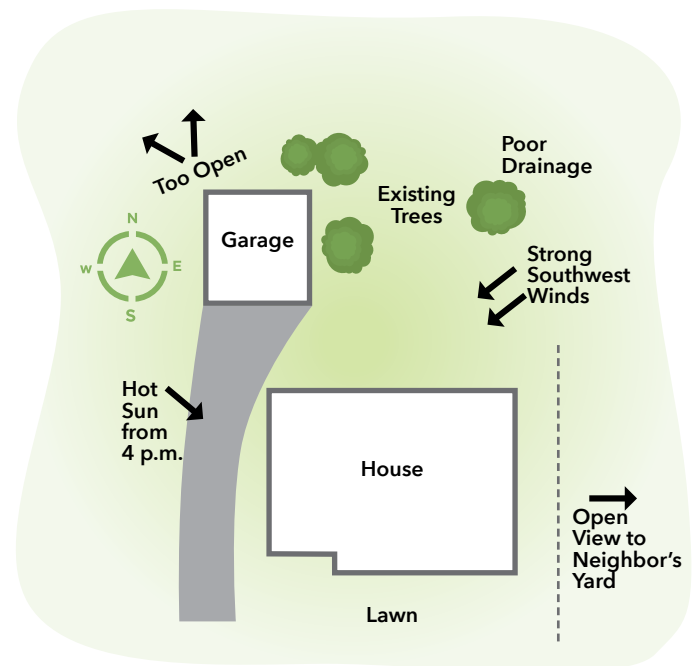
Did you know?

- Wherever grass was installed across the U.S., space was lost to native plants - and to the microorganisms, beneficial insects and wildlife that evolved with them. As a result, the typical yard doesn't support much ecological diversity.
- Turfgrasses not only reduce the variety of native plants and animals, they may also encourage invasive species. Japanese beetles, for example, lay their eggs in the soil under lawns (especially those cut short). The grubs feed on grass roots and mature as adults that can eat several hundred common landscape plants, shrubs and trees.
- Gas-powered lawn mowers produce emissions that impact air quality, and fuel spills are common.
- Homeowners tend to apply much more fertilizer and pesticide per acre than farmers do. Some of those chemicals make their way into downstream waterbodies or indoors on our clothing and shoes.
- In the summer, the use of drinking water increases significantly. Most of that extra volume goes onto lawns.

Where to begin?

Are you curious about reducing lawn on your property?
Start by looking at what's already there.

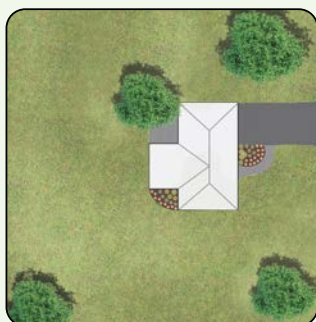
- Draw an aerial view of your property, including the property lines.
- Include a compass rose to show the cardinal directions.
- Add the house and outbuildings, driveway and sidewalks, patios and decks, permanent play equipment, and other built features.
- Sketch in planted areas: flowerbeds and edible gardens, foundation plantings, raingardens or shoreline buffers, hedges, trees and shrubs - and, of course, lawn. Is there a wooded area on your property, or a wetland? Include that, as well.
- Mark slopes, swales and other terrain features (natural and built).
- After a rainfall or during snowmelt, watch how water flows over your property - from the roofline, over paved surfaces and across the landscaping. Indicate the direction of flow on your map, noting spots where water tends to pool (or where it's always dry).
- What else do you notice? Places that need more shade to combat summer heat, perhaps, or exposed areas that receive the brunt of winter winds?



Get set...

Now you've got the lay of the land - but consider these questions before you take action.

- How does your family use the yard now? What are your goals for the space?
- Where can you identify patches of lawn that are never used or require a lot of maintenance?
- How much time, energy and money do you have for lawn replacement? (Remember that you don't have to do it all at once!)
- Do you prefer the tidy look of beds, borders and boxes? Or do you want something more naturalistic?
- Each plant has specific needs for light, moisture and soil type. Where can you identify the different growing conditions on your property?
- Which plants fit in the available space? Make sure you're choosing species that won't grow into power lines or reach over property boundaries and roadways.

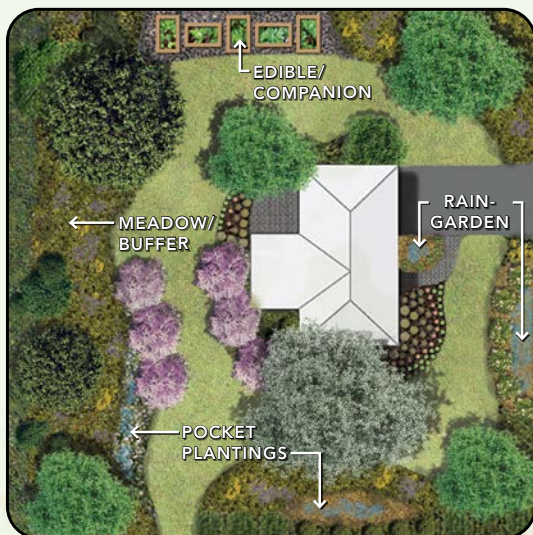


Before - lots of lawn

Make that change!

**There are so many options to replace lawn!
Which of these might work in your yard?**

- Bordered flower beds create a more formal setting for native wildflowers and grasses anywhere in the yard
- Pocket plantings are patches of native plants within the lawn
- Meadows are large plantings that simulate the look and function of native prairie



After - lawn and so much more!

- Ground covers or native shortgrass offer a wide view like lawn but need little or no mowing
- Raingardens capture excess runoff
- Shoreline buffers divide the yard from a lake, stream or wetland
- Vegetable gardens, orchard plantings and herb boxes feed your family
- Trees and shrubs create shade and privacy, and can support diverse pollinators and wildlife.

Minnetonka residents want to know...

I'm replacing most of my lawn but keeping a patch. Should I stop mowing in spring?

Turfgrass - whether short or long - doesn't provide food for native pollinators and wildlife. And while pollinator lawns (those with added low-growing perennial plants) offer some nectar, mowing is still required to keep grass from overgrowing the flowers or spreading seed to new locations.

Where you choose to keep lawn, mow at 3-3.5 inches every two to three weeks to improve its condition. Why?



- Mowing low stresses grass plants. They divert energy to growing new leaves instead of putting down roots.
- Shallow root systems don't build healthy soil or hold water well, and short roots can't reach water deeper in the soil.
- Water stress makes plants vulnerable to diseases and pests.
- Slightly longer grass shades and cools the soil, reducing evaporation.

My yard has a lot of Creeping Charlie. Is that a good replacement for lawn?

Also known as ground ivy, creeping Charlie is a perennial plant introduced from Europe. It often grows in shady or damp soils where grass performs poorly. Its small purple flowers blossom in spring. Some of the blossoms offer a big dose of nectar, enticing bees to keep visiting - but most of the flowers offer just a little nectar. This trick ensures good pollination for the plant but doesn't really help pollinators. Where you can, replace creeping Charlie with yarrow, pussytoes or other low-growing ground cover plants that support pollinators with good nutrition and energy.



How can I learn more?

Visit the Resilient Minnetonka project at minnetonkamn.gov/resilient-minnetonka for more tips and resources to pursue your lawn reduction goals. You can:

- Find workshops, online learning modules, storymaps and other educational materials - including a handout introducing strategies to replace lawn
- Link to the annual tree & shrub sale (held in spring) and the native plant sale (held May through September)
- Apply for the city's technical assistance program, including site consultations, design and planning, buckthorn pickup, and rebates (Minnetonka residents only, while funding lasts)
- Identify funding opportunities from the state and your watershed district
- Find lists of companies that provide landscape design or maintenance services.