

Rethinking the Lawn *Alternatives that require less maintenance and resources.*

By Kate Benisek

Although lawns are one of the most recognizable and valued parts of the American public and private landscape, they require a sizeable investment in time, money, energy and work. Many lawns in New England consist of grasses that are not ideally suited to either our climate or soils, and maintaining them often involves large amounts of water, fuel and chemicals. But, fortunately, there are many beautiful and functional alternatives to turf lawn that deserve their time in the sun (or shade).

Chemical use on lawns is a major cause for environmental concern, as runoff makes its way to ground water, rivers, lakes and streams, affecting wildlife and human populations. The significant environmental cost to mowing and irrigating that can be abated by using native grasses, sedges and herbaceous plants in place of turf. Using plants that are site-appropriate and adapted to a New England climate reduces the use of supplemental water and over-fertilization.

There are many beautiful and functional alternatives to turf lawn that deserve their time in the sun (or shade). Ground covers provide aesthetically pleasing variations of texture, height and color without compromising the positive physical features that make lawns safe, comfortable place to play or recreate.

Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*) is a native grass-like plant that can provide verdant ground cover in shade to sun. It is hardy, and spreads via rhizomes underground. It can be planted by seeds or plugs.

Meadow lawns combine the hearty, taller grasses with herbaceous plants and wildflowers to become a beautiful, layered lawn that requires infrequent mowing, as well as beneficial habitat for pollinator species.

Though **white clover** (*Trifolium album*) or **strawberry clover** (*Trifolium fragiferum*) can be considered to be a pest in standard lawns, it is a beautiful grass alternative. The fragrant blooms are beneficial to insects. Roots go deep and hold moisture. Clover pulls nitrogen out of the air and fixes it in the soil, fertilizing itself.

Freedom or “ecolawns” are composed of hardy grasses (sunny sites), sedges (shady sites) and other plants that require fewer inputs than a traditional lawn. While mowed higher than traditional turf, a freedom lawn can provide a look and feel similar to lawns with more intense maintenance programs. Freedom lawn mean freedom to play because they are chemical free!

Bark or preferably **leaf mulch** may be used as a ground cover on bare, eroding soil by itself. It provides a stable base for the establishment of other ground covers, preserves moisture, and uses organic material from your own back yard.

Choosing the right plant for the right place has numerous benefits for the environment. Incorporating native species in a lawn can support wildlife, enrich soil, and reduce water and energy consumption while providing a visually pleasing, safe space for people to enjoy.