

# Less lawn & loving it

By Sara Baker Michalak

Do you do lawn just like the neighbors do—the requisite shrubbery, a tree or two, and some version of the garden row, all kept neatly in place by grass? Oh, you may dress your yard a little differently than the next, but the basic wardrobe remains pretty much the same, doesn't it?

Beware: lawn love may soon be challenged in your neighborhood. The landscaping blogs are buzzing with the proclamation that there is more, much more than the requisite yard. How do these alternatives shake down in Western New York? We spoke to two of the area's lawn and garden experts, an ecologist, and an engaged homeowner.

Sally Cunningham is an author, columnist, certified Nursery Professional and consultant for Lockwood's Greenhouses of Hamburg. Rich Tedeschi owns Jacrist Gardening Services, an award-winning design and installation firm. Priscilla Titus is an ecologist with Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy, an organization that preserves the quality, beauty, and ecological health of Chautauqua region waters. Gail Zeppetello is a gardener and homeowner in North Buffalo.

*So, what's wrong with grass?*

**SC:** Pristine lawns can be difficult to establish and are high-maintenance. Grass means high water-usage that competes with trees and shrubs. Keeping lawns looking good often requires using chemicals and increasing the risks of pollution, though I would add that for individuals who want a lush, healthy lawn with little or no chemical use, good organic lawn programs are available.

**RT:** Compared to the alternatives, grass is boring!

**PT:** Nothing is wrong with grass, really. Using a palette of the many interesting and beautiful native grasses contributes to a healthy landscape. The problem arises when only one or just a few species of grasses, usually those that are not native to the region, are used ... The resources used to maintain this unnatural monoculture can result in excess water use, pollution of our valuable resources, and loss of wildlife.

**GZ:** To be honest, I'm not much of a lawn person. But after a construction project of ours damaged a strip of the neighbor's yard I wanted to replace it. Since I try to garden in an ecologically sound way, I wanted grass seed that was organic, wouldn't need herbicides, and would thrive in my neighborhood's clay soil. I found "eco-lawn" seed mix, offered by the Wildflower Farm ([www.wildflowerfarm.com](http://www.wildflowerfarm.com)), that sounded ideal.

*Interesting, Gail. Let's talk more about your eco-lawn in a couple of minutes. But first, Sally, Rich, and Priscilla, let's say I consider letting go of some grass. What do I do now?*

**SC:** Garden rooms, layered plantings, islands, groundcovers, hard coverings from familiar to whimsical—lots of things!

**RT:** Aesthetics and budget are the main considerations. For gardeners, I suggest increasing planting bed size with some of the exciting perennials becoming available now. For homeowners with less time or interest in landscape care, an area with a few show-stopping lower-maintenance plants and shrubs interspersed with hardscaping (decorative rock, mulch, et cetera) can provide dramatic results.

**PT:** As a mother and pet-owner, I appreciate having a soft, inviting area for kids and dogs to enjoy. Keep some of that while breaking it up with perennial and shrub borders, rain gardens, and other features such as benches and birdbaths. Surround them with low, indigenous groundcovers like clover, partridge berry, and creeping phlox, mixed with native sedges.

*Won't the neighbors be irritated if I fill my yard with a bunch of weird stuff?*

**SC:** Actually, more people are speaking out about the chemicals needed to maintain conventional lawns than about the alternatives, once they see them. Health concerns are associated with these chemicals and how they can affect people, pets, birds, and other wildlife.



Three Buffalo front yards that rely more on perennials than grass.

**RT:** I'm hearing the same thing, Sally. And design and plant selection make all the difference. I tell my clients that they can either do what the neighbors do, or they can create a tapestry.

**PT:** I wondered this myself when I replaced a border of lawn between our driveway and the neighbor's with a mix of annuals, perennials, and small shrubs. I've gotten nothing but favorable comments! Sometimes, people confuse "wildflowers" with "weeds" and assume that wildflower gardens are simply untended lawns. A little education can go a long way.

*What would you suggest for some of the trouble spots where grass won't grow well?*

**SC:** Avant-garde solutions for high traffic areas include colored glass pebbles, white stone, or colored sand. Steppable groundcovers that bear foot traffic like thymes, mosses, and sedums go way beyond myrtle, ivy, and pachysandra.

**RT:** For small urban lots and under trees, use pavers or a path of ground brick or pebbles interspersed with a few striking perennials; also find plants with multi-seasonal interest—bergenia, for example, is a brilliant green in spring, with candelabra flowers in May, turning burgundy in fall, and stays that way all winter. A strategically placed small table and chairs provide a beautiful haven.

**PT:** Foundations around buildings tend to be compacted and dry. Our native lilies, iris, bunchgrasses, stonecrop, rock fern, barren strawberry, and cactus are all underused and are foundation-tolerant. Small berry-producing shrubs here will attract butterflies.

*How about the cost and maintenance of some of these alternatives?*

**SC, RT:** The alternatives can be more expensive up front than a lawn, but cost significantly less in the time, labor, and materials needed for long term maintenance.

**PT:** In the right habitat, native plants don't need fertilizers, pesticides, or irrigation and leave the homeowner with more time to enjoy a healthier landscape and the beneficial wildlife habitat that it provides. The environmental costs we and our children will pay for our widespread use of non-native species can't really be underestimated.

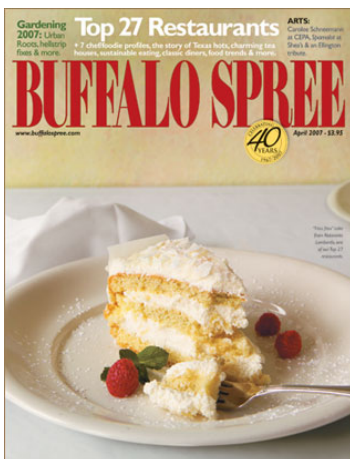
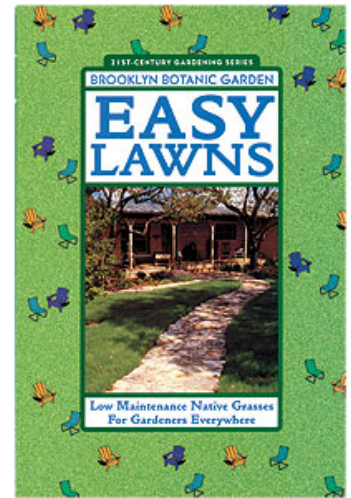
*Now, Gail, back to that eco-lawn. Tell me a little about it.*

**GZ:** I was a novice when it came to planting a lawn. The eco-lawn seeding process was quick and easy, results were immediate, and it's lush and green without fertilizer. I love the look—it grows to about six inches high and falls over gracefully. I know other eco-lawn owners who prefer the cropped look, so they mow it. Since it's a slow growing grass, it needs mowing less often than other lawns do.

*Thanks, everyone. You've planted lots of good ideas.*

*Sara Baker Michalak writes and tends her meadow garden in Dunkirk. She avoids offending the neighbors by keeping well-tended borders, inviting people in to wander the paths and enjoy comfy resting places for enjoying the resident birds and butterflies ([www.canadanaywildflowers.com](http://www.canadanaywildflowers.com)).*

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