

Shrink Your Lawn!  
Energy Matters  
John Clough, New London Energy Committee

Are you kidding me? I love my lawn, - and apparently many others love their lawns, too. It is estimated that there are 50,000 square miles of lawns in the US, three times the land devoted to irrigated corn. Depending on individual city locations, 30 to 60% of the fresh water in urban areas is used to water lawns.

Lawns cost us real money: \$5.2 billion is spent on fossil fuel based lawn fertilizers each year, out of the \$25 billion that benefits the lawn care industry. In addition, 6.7 million pounds of synthetic pesticides are applied every year, and 580 million gallons of gas are used on lawn care. EPA estimates that over 17 million gallons of gas are spilled each year refueling mowers and garden equipment -- more than was spilled by the Exxon Valdez! The damage to our watersheds, streams and lakes must be considered immense.

Lawns have a huge effect on the air we breathe and appear to be an important factor in climate change. The EPA estimates that 5% of the country's air pollution comes from lawn mowing -- one hour of mowing pollutes as much as 350 miles of driving a car. A "traditional" mower spews 87 pounds of CO<sup>2</sup> and 54 pounds of other pollutants every year.

Added to the above is the intrusion into our lives by lawn mower noise, or perhaps even worse, the high whine of leaf blowers. An expansive lawn may be the suburban ideal and perhaps a status symbol, but added to the huge burden put on air and water there is an immediate cost to our neighborhoods: noise.

OK, I'm convinced to shrink my lawn. With less to mow, I will have more time and, especially if currently I hire someone else to care for it, more money. Shall I just stop mowing a portion or shall I plant something else, hopefully something that requires even less maintenance than mowing once a week?

A Google search for "shrink your lawn" comes up with over 79,000 web sites with answers ranging from installing sophisticated and possibly expensive landscaping to the simpler mow every other week, and even the more drastic lifestyle change: stop mowing a portion completely.

An article found in the Master Gardener web site by M. Hillman entitled, "Honey, I'm Not Going To Cut The Lawn This Year," provides an entertaining story with pictures of what happens when one stops mowing his lawn. The author and his wife learn to love their new landscape, but the process seems very similar to that of a usually clean-shaven man growing a beard. It's pretty rough to look at in the beginning, and one must persevere through the comments of neighbors and passers-by. The eventual new look may always irk some of the neighbors, but the Hillmans enjoy the swath of wild plants that spring up and take delight when deer, turkeys, song birds and other wildlife appear in their yard. The burden of maintenance is not completely lifted, however; to keep their backyard "meadow" from growing brush and eventually trees, the Hillmans' patch will need a once a year mowing.

"Alternative to Traditional Lawns," by J. Gallion, also found on the Master Gardeners website, gives a "how to" recipe for replacing turf with native plants. The writer is from Maryland, which makes his choice of plants suspect for use in New Hampshire. Good ways to find appropriate native plants for this area include checking the UNH Agricultural Extension website, your local garden center, or the town library's gardening books. Gallion suggests individuals make a reasonable goal for reducing turf area, and then carry out the plan a bit at a time. For instance, a 50% lawn shrinkage might be accomplished in five years at a manageable rate of 10% a year.

Simply put, to get the job done, Gallion recommends starting at the outside edge of the lawn area and moving towards the center, leaving grass walkways. To kill the grass in the areas to be planted, lay down newspaper and cover it with 2" of compost (weed free) and 1" of mulch. The plants can be installed through that mixture as the newspaper does its job of smothering the grass. Rototilling or otherwise disturbing the soil is a "no-no," as it brings up new weed seeds.

It may seem a bit far out, but moss was the turf replacement choice of a 78-year-old gentleman who turned his lawn into a moss garden, according to a recent New York Times feature article. He claims it is beautiful and he hasn't "watered his lawn since the Kennedy administration." The article can be found at [www.mossacres.com](http://www.mossacres.com), where one can also find a source of moss and ferns as well as lots of advice about changing a lawn to a mossy landscape.

New London Energy Committee's Mark Vernon is spearheading a trial plot showing the conversion of lawn to native plants. The plot is located next to the Town of New London's Transfer Station & Recycling Center (to the left of the entry, near the edge of Route 11). It should also be noted that Spring Ledge Farm has literature, advice, and plant material to aid those who wish to shrink their lawns and Tracy Library has an excellent collection of helpful books for the native plant gardener.

But really, lawns are part of what make our houses into homes. Few people want to do away completely with the smell of newly cut grass, soft green places to recline or walk barefoot, and the well trimmed, orderly appearance of a lawn. The lawn care industry's constant improvement in lawn watering equipment, pesticides, fertilizers and machinery makes bigger lawns easier to maintain and helps play to the lawn "farmer" in most of us. But our becoming aware of the problems lawns cause as they consume a lot of our nation's energy and add very significant ecological damage ought to lead us towards smaller plots where we can still enjoy the pleasures of a lawn.

*John Clough is a member of the Town of New London's Energy Committee.*