

My Yard – July

The Lawn

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org

What yardwork takes the most time and effort mid-summer? Probably lawns. There's an old adage that "grass is the easiest plant to grow but one of the hardest to maintain." It's estimated that 60-80 percent of the open space in communities is covered in lawn and in summer it accounts for more than 80 percent of water usage. On a hot, dry summer day in Lincoln, over 50 million gallons of water is pumped from the Platte River near Ashland about 30 miles away and applied to lawns. Is this the best use of our potable water?

For those who want to do their part for the environment while still keeping a fair amount of lawn, one of the most important things to do is to relax expectations. Instead of competing for the most pristine, weed-free patch of grass on the block, have some larger goals in mind—safe and abundant water supplies, cleaner streams, biodiversity and better tree health.

Here's a few tips to minimize the time, energy, waste and expense of summer lawn care:

Watering

- Don't overwater. Use drip irrigation if possible, and carefully monitor any irrigation systems used. Frequent, shallow watering makes plants susceptible to wind, drought and temperature extremes and results in shallow roots that are vulnerable in dry periods.
- Reduce the amount of impermeable surfaces by using plants, porous pavement or other permeable surfaces for driveways, sidewalks and patios.
- Water early in the day to prevent moisture loss and avoid disease problems.
- Use rain gardens, bioretention cells, swales, vegetated filter strips, permeable surfaces, green roofs, underground tanks or rain barrels to conserve water wherever feasible.
- Redirect downspouts away from pavement and onto planted areas.
- Protect slopes with groundcovers.
- Install underground tanks to collect rainwater from rooftops and hardscaping and use for watering later.
- Mulch rain gardens with plants or shredded hardwood or bark mulch, which are less likely to wash away than lighter weight mulches.

Mowing

- Lower your expectations; accept some mid-summer dormancy or drabness and apply only enough water to keep the lawn alive but not lush, realizing it will green up again in fall.
- Limit turfgrass to areas where it's truly needed for play and activity. Consider using more drought-tolerant species like tall fescue or buffalograss that require only minimal watering once established; or use non-grass plants in areas with minimal foot traffic. Yarrow, sedum, clover, sedges and many other plants have shown great potential as replacements.
- Avoid using turfgrass in deep shade or other difficult areas.
- Mow no lower than 3.5" and leave it at that height all year long.
- Always return clippings to the turf to return valuable nutrients and to limit lawn residues in landfills.

CUTLINE: Though lawns with white clover may not be your preference, it fixes nitrogen, supports pollinators and is more tolerant of drought and diseases.

