



NEBRASKA STATEWIDE

Arboretum

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Let's Talk Lawns

If you're considering transitioning all or part of your traditional lawn to a more environmentally sustainable alternative, here are some tips to get you started.

1

Think about the function of your space

Do you have pets or kids that may need an outdoor space that functions more like a traditional lawn and can withstand playing or heavy foot traffic?

Or would you prefer to replace all or some of your traditional lawn with a garden that will help to sustain pollinating insects and other wildlife?

Is creating wildlife habitat your primary end goal, or do you want to use the space for recreation and entertainment? Answering these questions and understanding how you envision the functionality of your space can help you determine whether you want a non-traditional lawn (in other words, a "lawn" that functions like a traditional lawn but is integrated with other plant species to make it diverse) or a lawn alternative (like a native pollinator garden) that completely replaces all or some of your turf grass.

2

Choose a polyculture vs. a monoculture lawn

If you decide you would like a green space that can withstand heavy foot traffic and will function more like a traditional lawn, consider transitioning to a polyculture lawn, like a "bee lawn," which integrates turf grass with other low-growing, flowering pollinator plants—like Dutch white clover, self heal, yarrow, and creeping thyme.

A polyculture lawn preserves the function of a traditional turf grass lawn while also enhancing the benefits for wildlife and the environment.

Tips for transitioning to a polyculture lawn

- Choose the right plant for the right place. Evaluate how much sun, shade, and moisture the space gets and pick plants that will thrive in your environment.
- Let benign weeds like dandelions, violets, plantain, wood sorrel, and purslane coexist with your turf grass.
- Aerate your existing lawn first to allow for soil-seed contact when you seed in the herbaceous flowering plants.
- Leave grass clippings when you mow and use little to no additional fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides.



Self heal can be part of a polyculture lawn.

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Sedges can be planted for a longer lawn alternative.

3

Think about whether a taller lawn could work

If you don't mind the look of a longer, slightly unkempt lawn, consider replacing part of your traditional turf grass with a fescue meadow, which is a blend of native and non-native cool season grasses, or a sedge meadow. Cultivar fescues require less mowing and maintenance and can be left to grow longer (up to 8 inches), at which point they tend to flop over for a lush, natural look. If you prefer a more conventional look, fescue meadows can also be mown as short as 3 inches.

4

Consider scale and budget

If you decide to replace some or all of your traditional turf grass lawn with a lawn alternative like a native pollinator garden or a prairie or meadow, consider the cost of planting with seed versus bedding plants.

Seed is typically more cost-efficient than purchasing bedding plants. For example, if you have a 100 square foot space, we recommend putting in a plant every two square feet. If you put in 50 plants at \$4/plant, your cost will be \$200 (not including mulch or any soil amendments you do prior to planting). Compare that to a native wildflower seed mix, which costs approximately \$9/ounce, covering up to 150 square feet, or \$90/lb., covering up to 3,500 square feet.



A traditional lawn can be replaced with a native garden.

5

Consider aesthetics, maintenance and end goals

How do you want your space to look? Do you prefer a more orderly, manicured garden, or are you interested in a wilder, more natural prairie-type look?

How much do you want to manage the space by watering, weeding, pruning, deadheading and other tasks?

Remember, low-maintenance is never no maintenance. Even if you choose to pursue a wilder lawn alternative like a prairie or a meadow, there will still be some seasonal upkeep involved.



Visit plantnebraska.org for more tips on sustainable landscaping, lists of native species, garden design guides and more.