



## Have you outgrown your grass?

Like many traditional gardeners I have a strong appreciation for turf grass. It provides a place to rest the eye and showcase mixed borders; it also creates a sense of order around the house. If you have children, it provides a soft, natural, not to mention dirt free play space.

But let's face it, Turf grass is high maintenance: it uses a lot of water, fertilizer and time. And while I would choose it any day over the so-called landscaping of gravel that I see all too often in my subdivision; there are many alternatives that are more eco-friendly and just as beautiful. (By the way, swapping gravel for live plants is NOT eco-friendly; in fact it adds to global warming, eliminates natural habitat for wildlife and it's depressing to look at).

One way I have addressed these issues with turf grass is simply to reduce the amount of area dedicated for turf grass. I have a very small area in my front yard, for added interest; and a slightly larger area in the back yard for the family to play on and enjoy, and to help cool the backyard in the summer.

If you prefer to eliminate the turf grass completely, or if you're looking for something to fill in where you've removed some turf grass, there are certainly a number of options available to you to use as a groundcover that are very similar to (or very different from) the typical bluegrass lawn.

So if you are ready for a change, consider these turf grass alternatives.

### Options for sunny spots

#### Sheep Fescue

Sheep Fescue is a cool season, drought-resistant, hardy native bunch grass. This blue-green colored grass likes moist soils and does well in sandy or gravel soil types. It can be used as a cover crop with other native grass and wildflower plantings. Sheep fescue is excellent for erosion control, landscaping, or high elevation pasture. It grows to a



height of 12-24". Like hard fescue, this species does not produce much usable forage, but provides excellent ground cover. Blue/sheep fescue is somewhat slow to establish; however, once established it is very persistent, winter-hardy, and drought-tolerant.

Blue/sheep fescue grass is a short (dwarf type), semierect bunchgrass that forms dense tufts with numerous, stiff, rather sharp, bluish-green leaves. Its overall stature is very similar to hard fescue, but somewhat shorter. Fine leaved, dark green, and low growing.

### **Creeping thyme**



Creeping Thyme is a great alternative to small turf areas. It is fragrant and drought tolerant, but slow spreading. Each plant should spread about 4-6 inches a year so filling a large space takes a hefty budget or a lot of patience. Make sure to plant into fast-draining soil for optimal growth. Plan to weed aggressively the first year, but by the third or fourth year, it will begin to out-compete new weed seeds. To speed up the

process, divide larger clumps to fill in any gaps. Once filled in, the Thyme is close to trouble-free. It doesn't require mowing or fertilizing and only needs watering to become established and in drought conditions. It can handle moderate foot traffic (being walked on once or twice a day), and it releases a lovely fragrance as you stroll over it.

### **Dwarf Cinquefoil**

*Potentilla neumanniana* 'Nana'



Dwarf Cinquefoil has small, yellow flowers, which hover over strawberry-like leaves that reach 3-4" tall with about a 1' spread. Plant it in well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. Then, leave it alone. Dwarf Cinquefoil is tough as nails, but doesn't tolerate being transplanted. Dwarf Cinquefoil can also tolerate a lot of foot traffic.

## Creeping Sedum

Creeping Sedum is a very drought tolerant and hardy succulent that never needs fertilizing – or really any care at all other than the occasional watering. Plant in full sun, about a foot apart. Some varieties are faster growing than others, but most will be thick enough to out-compete weeds by the third season. Creeping Sedum will only handle light foot traffic.

## Dutch White Clover

*Trifolium repens*

Clovers were once added to turf mixes for their excellent nitrogen-fixing talents until the weed killer 2,4D turned out to kill it, too. Clover can tolerate some shade, poor soil and less water than turf grass. You can mix it with other low groundcovers or plant it alone. You can mow regularly to mimic the look of a lawn, mow once in summer to remove brown flowers, or not mow at all.



## For Shade

### Creeping Mazus

*Mazus reptans*



Like most shade plants, Mazus prefers moist soil, so provide some irrigation in dry weather. It will grow to 2" tall and once established it's a dense green carpet that outcompetes weeds and sports attractive lavender blooms in spring through summer. Creeping Mazus is also known for it's fall color.



## Common Periwinkle

*Vinca Minor*

*Vinca Minor* is a perennial evergreen ground cover that is winter hardy. It is closely related to the big leaf periwinkle (*V. major* L.), except in size and hardiness. Common periwinkle seldom exceeds a height of 6 inches although runners may trail long distances on the ground. The runners root at the node under moist conditions. The thick glossy leaves form a good ground cover. Small blue flowers occur indeterminately from April to September.



## Beard Tongue

*Penstemon Barbatus*



Beard Tongue is a hardy, upright perennial. They fare well in bright afternoon shade--pay attention to their stalks because when not receiving enough sun they will start to flop over. Tubular flowers can be found on the *Penstemon* plants in either red, pink, purple, or white, and they will be sure to attract butterflies and hummingbirds to your garden. They can grow anywhere from 18-24 inches high and 12-24 inches wide. You'll want to plant them in fertile soil 12-18 inches apart in the spring and mulch them to retain moisture. Water them thoroughly when the soil has dried out as they require a medium amount of water. They also like to be placed in well drained, rich acidic soil. Deadhead the spent flowers to encourage reblooming. Cut back the plant once you've had the first frost in your area.

## **Cranesbill**

*Erodium reichardii*

Cranesbill is a dainty-looking but tough plant, forming dense foliage tuft 3–6 in. high, 1 ft. across. This plant has dark green, roundish, tall leaves with scalloped edges. Cranesbill blooms profusely with white or rose pink flowers in the early spring into fall. Makes a good small-scale ground cover, rock garden plant. Plant in porous soil.



## **English Ivy**

*Hedera Helix*



Fast growing, hardy evergreen vine for shade or partial sun, good for screening, ground cover, erosion control. Their ability to grow in shade has made English ivy plants a traditional groundcover for problematic areas under trees, where most grasses do not grow well. Their vigorous, dense grow habit makes them an effective groundcover where the object is to crowd out weeds. On slopes, they can be used for erosion control.