

Lawns

by Lynn Doyle

There have been volumes written on the establishment and maintenance of lawns. Briefly, in order to establish a healthy lawn you need to select the type of grass or blend of grasses (most lawns are blends of more than one type of grass) that will best meet the expected wear and tear and growing conditions of the selected site. In the Pacific North West, cool weather grasses do best. Other factors to consider are the amount of light, soil type and drainage conditions the selected site will offer. Once established, ongoing maintenance with watering mowing, feeding and aeration as necessary will help to maintain the lawn's vigour for years to come. Vancouver Island has been lucky so far that we have not seen the same invasion and destruction of our lawns by the European Chafer Beetle that the Lower Mainland has seen. Here's hoping it stays that way.

Just as there are volumes written on the establishment and maintenance of lawns, there are volumes written on the virtues and negative environmental impacts of lawns. Opinions on both sides are strongly held. On the plus side, they can be aesthetically pleasing, provide competitive weed control, help control soil erosion, produce oxygen and provide playing and walking surfaces. On the other hand, in order to stay green, they can require up to 1/4 inch of water on a hot day, may need fertilizers which may then leach into waterways and drinking water and need mowing with internal combustion engines (said to produce more greenhouse gases than the oxygen produced by the same patch of lawn).

Compared to many other plants, it is claimed that grass produces less oxygen per square foot of land than many other types of vegetation and that there are other plants that provide better control of erosion. I have read that a well-watered lawn serves as a good fire barrier for those living in areas prone to interface wildfires. A drought-desiccated lawn, brown/blonde/gold whatever, is not only not fire resistant, it is fuel for a ground fire. I cannot find traditional lawns recommended for drought tolerant, fire-resistant landscaping in any areas along the west coast from BC to the Mexican border.



Droughts seem to be becoming more frequent, wide spread and longer lasting. Drought-tolerant grass seed mixes are much more widely available. Non-grass type turf alternatives are being widely promoted, including mowed yarrow, *Fragaria* species and *Thymus praecox*. These turf alternatives are drought-tolerant, fire-resistant and recommended for use as far south as San Diego and north into the Pacific North West. Almost as widely promoted are artificial lawns. The texture of the fibres used for domestic lawns is not the same as used in sports fields and is reportedly more like a mowed grass lawn.

Industry claims that they are environmentally friendly, fire safe and in the mid to longer term, financially comparable to a standard lawn. Once installed, artificial lawns do require some maintenance, but certainly not the 150 plus hours per year that the average North American spends on their lawn. Industry does say that on a hot day artificial lawns can be warmer than tradition lawns.

My personal experience: Firstly you need to know, I am terrified of lawn mowers; as a child I saw someone get hurt by a lawn mower. When I lived alone and had to cut my own grass, I used a push mower. Very quickly I stopped fertilizing, watering, liming and cheered when the moss appeared. No more mowing. Unfortunately moss does not stand up to much in the way of foot traffic. Flash forward to the present. What passes for my lawn is a combination of worn down pathways used by my 2 large dogs, yellow clover, drought-tolerant fescues and dandelions. I do not water my lawn. I have found that the things that stay green by far the longest, and one of the most durable under feet of my dogs, are the dandelions. By mowing the lawn just before the flowers set seeds, I have been able to keep most of the dandelions in the lawn and not in my vegetable or flower beds (and yes I do have separate beds. No composted dog offerings are permitted in the vegetable beds, that compost is reserved for the decorative beds).



A friend who lives in rural Vancouver Island and “will not waste (her) precious well water watering grass” has had great success with woolly thyme as a turf alternative. It has proven itself to be able to withstand the wear and tear of two active boys, their friends and a 50-pound dog. (*Thymus praecox* and its cultivars are rated drought tolerant, fire resistant and deer resistant by authorities along the West Coast from BC to Mexico.) Other friends have chosen to maintain small patches of lawn near the house. The lawn is lovingly manicured and kept green using grey water and stored rainwater. Faced with a totally blank slate or a lawn in need of major repair, within the confines of local and provincial regulations, we must each make the choice(s) that best suit our lifestyle. As I feel in the coming years further restrictions on the use of potable water for irrigation is likely, I think that limited water should play a significant part in one’s decisions.