

# DOWNSTREAM



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to enhance public awareness within the watershed region

## The Grass Is Always Greener: Landscape Alternatives to the Lawn - by J. Taylor



Photo by Peter Church

Most people agree that one thing everyone wants is to own their own home. This dream often includes a picturesque house, set back on a rolling green lawn. Many of us can put a nice grassy patch to good use for a picnic table or a game of catch, but just maybe, 2 full acres of perfectly manicured fairway isn't for everybody.

If it's your lawn, you have to mow it, fertilize it, fight off dandelions, various bugs, and sometimes even your own kids, if you want to keep it picture perfect. How many hours and dollars per year do you spend tending your lawn?

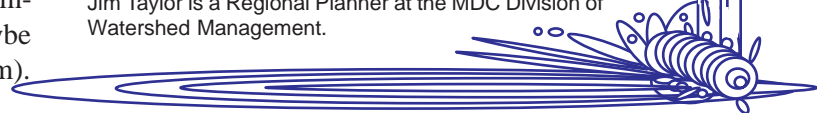
For many communities, residential irrigation systems have become one of the largest single user of municipal water. Runoff from a maintained lawn loads the groundwater with excessive nutrients and chemicals. That makes nature's job to purify that water a little more difficult before the next time we want to use it.

The rural surroundings of central Massachusetts tend to attract people who have a great appreciation for open space. But the nature that we find so attractive is beginning to feel the squeeze. Lawn, as we know it, has evolved from the setting around English manor houses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where high humidity and herds of sheep kept things lush and under control. The grasses that so many work so hard to keep the same year after year, differ from our natural landscape which is always growing and changing. Most common lawn grasses are not native, which accounts for why it requires so much maintenance, and also explains why it has limited appeal to many inhabitants of the local natural environment (except maybe those grubs - and the skunks that go digging after them).

This issue of Downstream offers an introduction to a compromise solution to the lawn quandary. Homeowners can have the best of both worlds by reducing the amount of lawn area and framing it with naturalized plant borders. By reducing the total size of a lawn, folks can have a manicured, high quality grass area for fewer dollars and hours invested, that also invites nature a bit closer to home. A current trend is for the utilization of lower maintenance, naturalistic designs that include native plants. Since native plants thrive in their natural setting, they will require less effort to flourish and remain healthy. And the end result? For the homeowner, less lawn means less work, less expense, more natural habitat, and more time for other activities!

Of concern today for growing communities is suburban sprawl. Sprawl greatly reduces natural habitat and threatens wildlife populations, as well as affecting water quality. While local planning boards wrestle with future development, using tools such as "cluster" and "open space" plans, what about the sprawl that already exists? To balance development impacts, homeowners could let a few more trees grow in their front yard, and encourage some undergrowth to sprout here and there. Ultimately, the environment would be healthier, less pleasing views would be better screened, there'd be a place outside to hang a hammock AND perhaps some time left over to use it.💧

Jim Taylor is a Regional Planner at the MDC Division of Watershed Management.



## What To Consider

### For Natural Planted Areas? - by Joe Kowalski

The first step for those interested in reducing lawn area, is to answer 3 basic questions that will help determine which plants are most appropriate for your home. First, how much area will be given over to natural growth? Next, how much sunlight and water does that area receive? Finally, what the desired effect: aesthetic or functional, such as wildflower beds, visual screens, or attractants to birds and wildlife?

In larger areas, planting trees is always a good option. Usually, where there is existing lawn there is an adequate amount of light to support almost all tree types and varieties. Home gardeners must consider choosing between evergreen or deciduous tree species. Evergreens work best as year-round wind breaks or visual screens, while deciduous trees are best for summer shade, fall color and allowing winter sunlight. Selecting species that naturally grow in this region bring the healthiest results. Also, in a truly natural setting, where leaves remain on the ground to create a beneficial layer of soil producing humus, the responsibilities of raking leaves and tree litter will be a thing of the past. But only you can decide how much effort you want to expend. If you are unsure about which type of native tree is best for your needs, contact the Massachusetts Arborist Association (508-653-3320) or a local nursery. These specialists will provide information about specific tree types relative to appearance, shape, mature size, life span, disease resistance, care, maintenance, and site suitability.

The most important thing to remember in tree selection is the phrase "The right tree for the right site". This motto will minimize the chance of encountering problems from unexpected maintenance or ending up with a tree that is in competition with a building, wall or other vegetation.

If less space is available for your naturally planted area, using a dwarf or "weeping" type of tree can add texture and interest. While these are not the best shade trees, they make up for this with a huge array of colorful spring flowers, fall foliage, and/or decorative or edible fruit for both humans and wildlife (especially birds). Once again, an arborist or qualified nursery can provide helpful information to make the proper decision.

Shrubs provide great potential for creating various natural planting scenarios with regard to texture, form, flowers, fall color and wildlife attraction (especially for butterflies). Shrubs vary in height from as low as 2 feet, at

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Photo by Dave Small

The Banded Hairstreak Butterfly, shown here feeding on a sweet clover flower, is one of the visitors you might find in your backyard wildlife habitat.

## Is There a Wildlife Habitat in Your Backyard?

Your backyard may be considered home by a dozen birds, two dozen native plant species, five kinds of butterflies and quite a few other plants and animals. The National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) Backyard Wildlife Habitat program™ can give you special verification and acknowledgement that your property is providing a place where the natural world can flourish. Maintaining a Backyard Wildlife Habitat not only brings the natural world into your yard, but it also helps to benefit environmental quality by improving the air, water and soil all around you. As more people become involved in this conservation effort, the positive affects will be multiplied throughout your community. On an even greater scale, habitat preservation is critical in areas where there is pressure for new development so that the ecological balance is maintained.

At your request, the NWF will send you a detailed packet of information that will explain the benefits and steps needed to create a Backyard Wildlife Habitat. Also included is an application form that you can fill out to verify that your backyard habitat provides food sources, water, cover for wildlife, places for animals to raise their young and conservation efforts made while maintaining your habitat. With your application, you will be asked to also include a \$15 payment for certification and support of NWF programs. Enrollment in this program makes a great educational experience for children of all ages or an ideal gift to your family.

To start your Backyard Wildlife Habitat and receive an information packet, give the NWF a call at (800) 822-1919 or visit them on the web at [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org). ♠

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maturity, to 15 feet high. This variance allows for plenty of “layering”, or a mixing of variously sized and textured plants in one area. Often times, shrubs can be planted in the shade under existing trees. As with trees, use of native species is more likely to result in a healthy and more natural landscape.

Even smaller spaces (down to 3’ x 3’) can be planted in a “natural” manner with the use of perennials. These plants are specifically known for an immense variety of colorful flowers and unique foliage. If well selected, they can have very little care associated with their upkeep, with the exception of occasional watering and weeding. Perennials can provide years of natural beauty with flowers at any time of the growing season that the gardener finds most desirable.

Another low-maintenance option might be to replace entire areas of lawn with other types of groundcover that require no mowing. Many leafy groundcover species stay low, add texture, and proliferate in the shade. Wildflower meadows are gaining in popularity due to colorful beauty and generally increasing environmental appreciation. There are several wildflower mixes available for broadcast seeding over a vast area which establishes itself much the same as a traditional lawn. Instead of mowing however, the idea is to sit back and watch the continually changing show of wild flowers and the wildlife it attracts as the growing season progresses.

Ornamental grasses are also quite popular. These grasses stay short or grow to several feet tall. Both the leaves and seed heads turn colors throughout the season and range from bright greens and yellows to red, or even purple. Ornamental grasses create a unique texture and form when added as a border or an accent to any planted area.

These are the most basic guidelines for consideration when redesignating some of your lawn space to a natural planting area. Follow the rules for available space, but once you identify which plants are most appealing and appropriate to your growing conditions, a mix of plant types, textures and sizes will work best. Finish off the area with a bench, boulder or statue and you’ve created your own individual natural space. You can fuel the project with your own enthusiasm or make it a family endeavor. When completed, your next task will be to just let it grow and admire the natural beauty! ♠

Joe Kowalski is the MDC Natural Resources Arborist at the Wachusett Reservoir.

## Further Reading

If you'd like to know more...

### Suggested Reading;

“*The Audubon Garden Makeover*,” by Janet Marinelli, Audubon Magazine, July-Aug. 2000

“*Going Native*,” by Janet Marinelli, Audubon Magazine, July-Aug. 1999

“*The Wild Lawn Handbook*,” by Stevie Daniels, 1995

“*To Mow or Grow*,” by Bret Rappaport, Wildflower Magazine, Spring 1996

“*The Chemical-Free Lawn*,” by Warren Schultz, 1989

“*Easy Care Native Plants*,” by Patricia Taylor, 1996

“*National Wildlife Federation Guide to Gardening for Wildlife*,” by Craig Tufts and Peter Loewer, 1995

“*The Natural Habitat Garden*,” by Ken Druse, 1994

### Internet Resources;

Native Plant Conservation Initiative ([www.nps.gov/plants](http://www.nps.gov/plants)): plant conservation, invasive exotics

The New England Wild Flower Society ([www.newfs.org](http://www.newfs.org)): plant conservation, naturalistic gardening

Wild Ones, Ltd. ([www.for-wild.org](http://www.for-wild.org)): grassroots projects, naturalistic landscaping, plant salvages



Downstream is produced by the Metropolitan District Commission/Division of Watershed Management of The Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Our goal is to inform the public about Watershed Protection issues and activities, provide a conduit for public input, and promote environmentally responsible land management practices.

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A reader asks:

**Q:** ...Since the goal of the Downstream newsletter must be one of maintaining good relations with abutters of MDC lands, and informing them of important environmental and land management issues, would it be possible to provide more scientific and taxonomic detail about the subject at hand?

**A:** It is our mission to provide thought provoking and interesting material for all of our readers, within our 4-page format. We try to share new ideas and concepts in a way that will inform, and hopefully peak interest in as many of our readers as possible. However, your point is a very good one, and it would be a good idea to provide a resource list for those who want to know more specific information about a subject. Starting with this issue, we will include a further reading list of sources and resources that might shed new light.

This newsletter is published twice yearly and includes articles of interest to landowners and residents of the MDC Division of Watershed Management watershed system communities. Please contact us if you wish to learn more about programs and assistance available to help landowners. We value the contribution your well cared for land provides and welcome the opportunity to work with you. Please send us questions or comments which we will address in subsequent newsletters. Our address is:

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TO:



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