

Reducing the Lawn — Meadows...and other Lawn Alternatives

CHALLENGE



MIKE TUSZYNSKI / MORRIS ARBORETUM



PAUL GREEN

Flowers are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON



STEVEN J. SAFFIER

Native plant sales, such as this one at the Churchville Nature Center, are great resources for meadow plants.

Wildflower or mixed meadows provide beautiful sprays of color and biodiversity.

Imagine — less mowing! More time! More money! Any sized parcel of lawn can be replaced with an array of alternatives that will add color, texture, habitat, and biodiversity to your outdoor space. If your primary goal is to decrease the maintenance requirements, including water and chemical fertilizer use, you have as many options as your creativity allows. Rather than the sharp edges of a

manicured lawn you may find, with some exploration, that you can enjoy the controlled informality of your own wildlife mini-habitats. See page 24 for some excellent lawn alternatives. Additional options are offered here.

Wildflower or mixed meadows provide beautiful sprays of color and biodiversity. They are typically a mix of native



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A mix of annual and perennials fill this field to create a rich palette at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell.



Liatis, *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea* species color this meadow. Photo by Edie Parnum, Backyards for Nature, Valley Forge Audubon Society.

wildflowers, such as butterfly-weed, asters, goldenrod, and black-eyed Susan, and grasses such as Indian grass, switch-grass, and little bluestem. Providing shelter, food, and nest sites to beneficial insects and pollinators, birds and butterflies, meadows are complemented by the wildlife attracted to them.

Meadows can be created in wet or dry locations and are best planted in the spring in full- or part-sun locations with a clear boundary. A small fence, border shrubs, or a series of benches communicates to neighbors that the meadow is intentional. Be sure to check if your local municipality has a residential weed law to

avoid potential citations and consider working with local officials to change restrictive measures.

Groundcovers that add appealing texture, seasonal blooms, and vibrant fall colors could be the perfect solution to those hard-to-mow areas. Groundcovers, varieties of which include evergreen and deciduous plants, shield the soil from erosion and allow for the slow percolation of water. Pennsylvania native groundcovers are adapted to our weather conditions and can thrive in shady areas.

NOTES

Plants for Lawn Conversion



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One of the many goldenrod species that will “volunteer” in a garden and provide color and nectar late into the season.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Meadow plants	
Big bluestem (grass)	<i>Andropogon gerardii</i>
Wild ginger	<i>Asarum canadense</i>
Butterfly-weed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>
New England aster	<i>Aster novae-angliae</i>
Purple coneflower	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>
Showy tick trefoil	<i>Desmodium canadense</i>
Ox eye sunflower	<i>Heliopsis helianthoides</i>
Blazing star (spiked gayfeather)	<i>Liatris spicata</i>
Wild bergamot	<i>Monarda fistulosa</i>
Foxglove beardtounge	<i>Penstemon digitalis</i>
Black-eyed Susan	<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>
Little bluestem (grass)	<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>
Showy goldenrod	<i>Solidago speciosa</i>
Indian grass	<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>
Groundcovers	
Pennsylvania sedge	<i>Carex pennsylvanica</i>
Partridge berry	<i>Mitchella repens</i>
Native pachysandra	<i>Pachysandra procumbens</i>
Mayapple	<i>Podophyllum peltatum</i>
Greek valerian	<i>Polemonium reptans</i>
Creeping phlox	<i>Phlox stonifera</i>
Virginia creeper	<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i>



Meadow at Mill Grove Audubon Center, Montgomery County.

Live fences are any kind of shrubby plantings that provide privacy and conceal unwelcome views and sounds. These can consist of a row of native shrubs such as viburnum or a stand of trees such as Eastern red cedar. Songbirds will appreciate the nesting space, materials, and food, and shy critters will utilize the live fence as an important habitat corridor.

Trees can be a perfect lawn alternative. A small grove of trees can be enhanced with shade-loving plants, creating a cool summer hide-away and serving to anchor a woodland habitat garden. Choose your species carefully after considering your soil type, water conditions, and anticipated growth. Take into account drought tolerance, wildlife benefits, resistance to disease, and maintenance requirements. Think about aesthetic and practical

features such as leaf density, autumn leaf color, and natural litter. A sweetgum tree, for example, is a beautiful and hardy species, but a mature tree will drop thousands of spiky seed capsules that will persist for many months if not raked.

Vegetable and fruit gardens, even small ones, replace lawn and provide home-grown produce for your table. Nothing is quite like the satisfying feeling of feeding your family vegetables or berries grown in your own soil! In autumn, a cover crop of legumes or cereal grains will prevent erosion and return nutrients to the soil. Composting your organic food scraps will provide a perfect source of humus to nourish your soil. Consider gardening strategies such as companion planting, where vegetables and flowers are grown together to entice beneficial insects or enhance plant growth.

NOTES

My AHA's

AHA!

Responsible Care for the Lawn that Lingers

Grass has some value in the home landscape and for that reason you may want to retain areas of turf for recreational use. A cooperative extension can advise you on the best seed for your soil, conditions, and needs, and one that will ultimately reduce your maintenance time.

- Test your soil: This “groundwork” will also be helpful when alternatives are considered.
- Be wise if you fertilize: If tests indicate a nutrient deficiency, carefully read the recommendations, correctly calibrate your spreader and

apply a slow-release fertilizer during clear weather.

- Miserly mowing: Mow no more than the top third of turf grass, allowing the longer blades to shade the ground. Let the clippings fall and return nutrients into the soil.
- Free your lawn: Allowing for non-turf plants such as clover to coexist within the grass creates a more tolerant and diverse lawn.
- Eliminate pesticides on the lawn — this is where children and pets play.

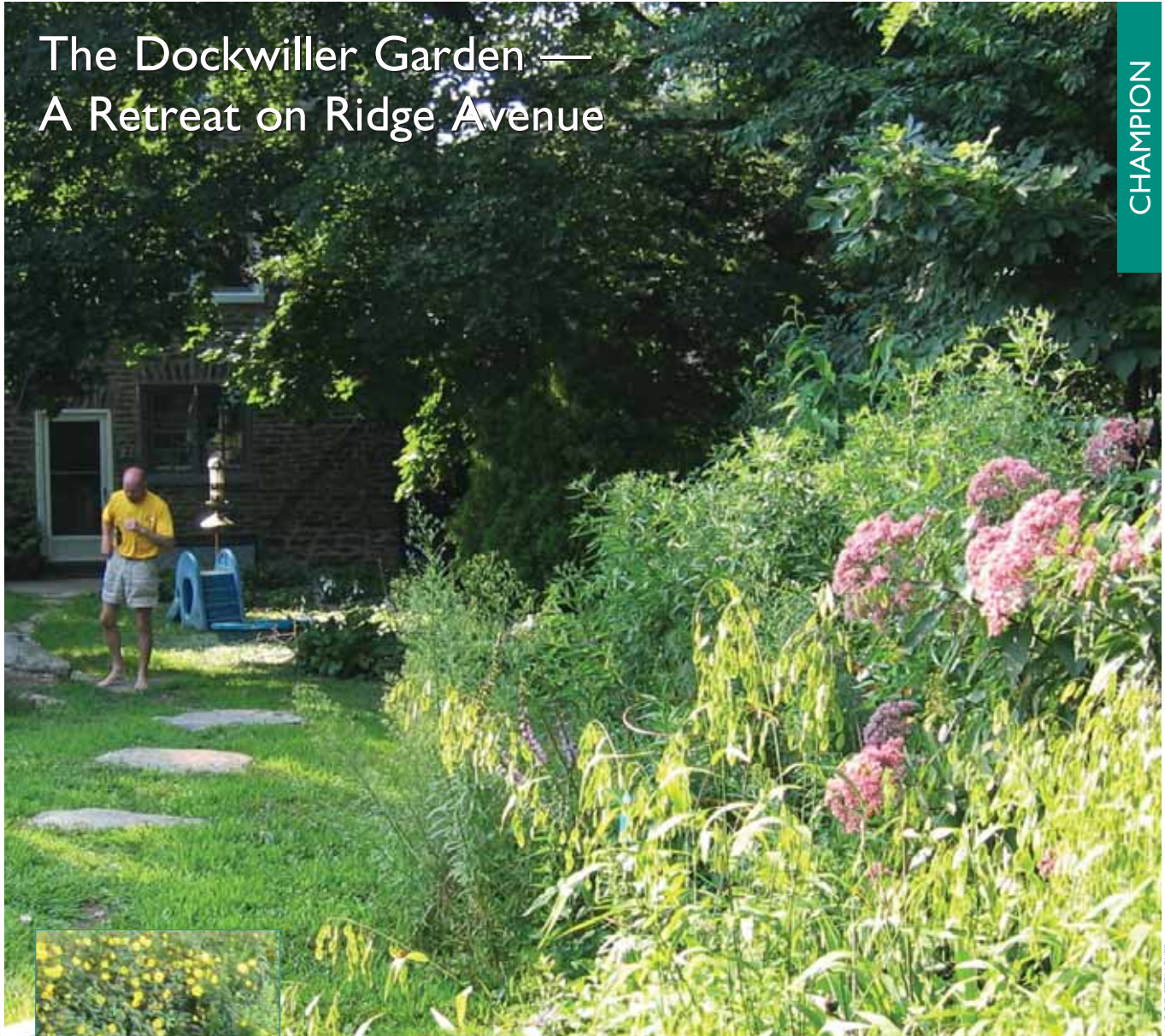


A mixed lawn.

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The Dockwiller Garden — A Retreat on Ridge Avenue

CHAMPION



PHILADELPHIA



MAGGIE STRUCKER

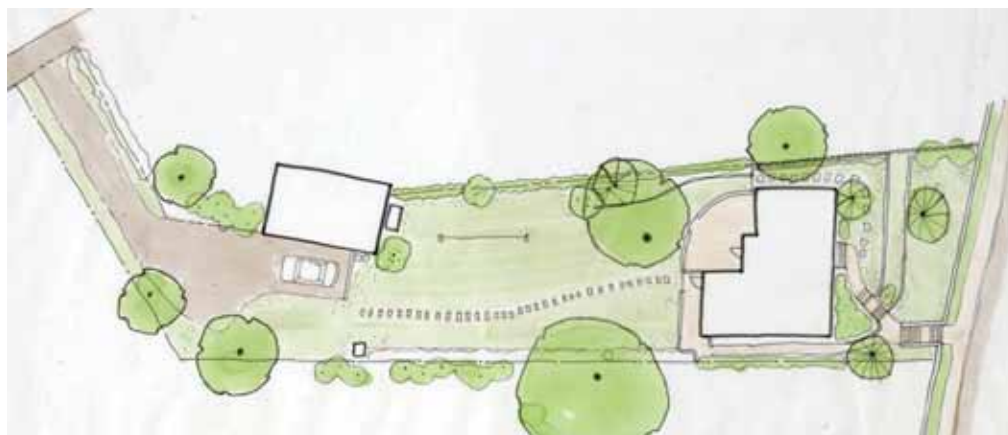
Along Ridge Avenue in the Manayunk Section of Philadelphia, the urban scene is comprised of colorful shops and rows of houses with different kinds of yards. “Nature sanctuary” is not the first thing that comes to mind in this active neighborhood where the sound of traffic frequently eclipses the chattering of resident birds.

Like many homes in the area, Tavis and Doc Dockwiller’s 1906 house had a typical turf grass lawn in the backyard when they moved in five years ago. The front of the house was also turf grass — green, yet devoid of wildlife. Tavis, a landscape architect, and her nature-loving husband both felt that something had to change. They made a plan to bring the wildlife back and started a small



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Steps (left) and driveway (above right) to the Dockwiller garden.



A rendering of the property as it stood prior to plan.



The plan for transformation.

woodland garden that included a birdbath and bird feeder, ferns, asters, and native magnolia.

Other projects in their backyard plan included the addition of a patio, and boulder steps. To serve as an historical link to the site, a representative schist and bluestone wall was built

(and often playfully rebuilt by Joe, the Dockwiller's two-year-old son). Above the wall, woodbine, ferns, ground phlox, serviceberry and various trees and shrubs were added to attract birds.

Eventually, their backyard saw the addition of a vegetable garden where "volunteer" cherry trees sprout in the

NOTES

Each addition and subtraction in the garden seems to bring with it a new set of insects and other organisms that linger oblivious to the passing traffic of this busy road.



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shadow of an American chestnut tree. The once small river birch trees acquired through a city program four years ago have grown to 15 feet and accompany new additions like blue indigo. Tavis likes to experiment with plants to see how things work together and fills spaces in the garden with plants purchased at local native plant events. There are ongoing efforts to remove invasive plants like Japanese honeysuckle, goutweed, English ivy, and multiflora rose.

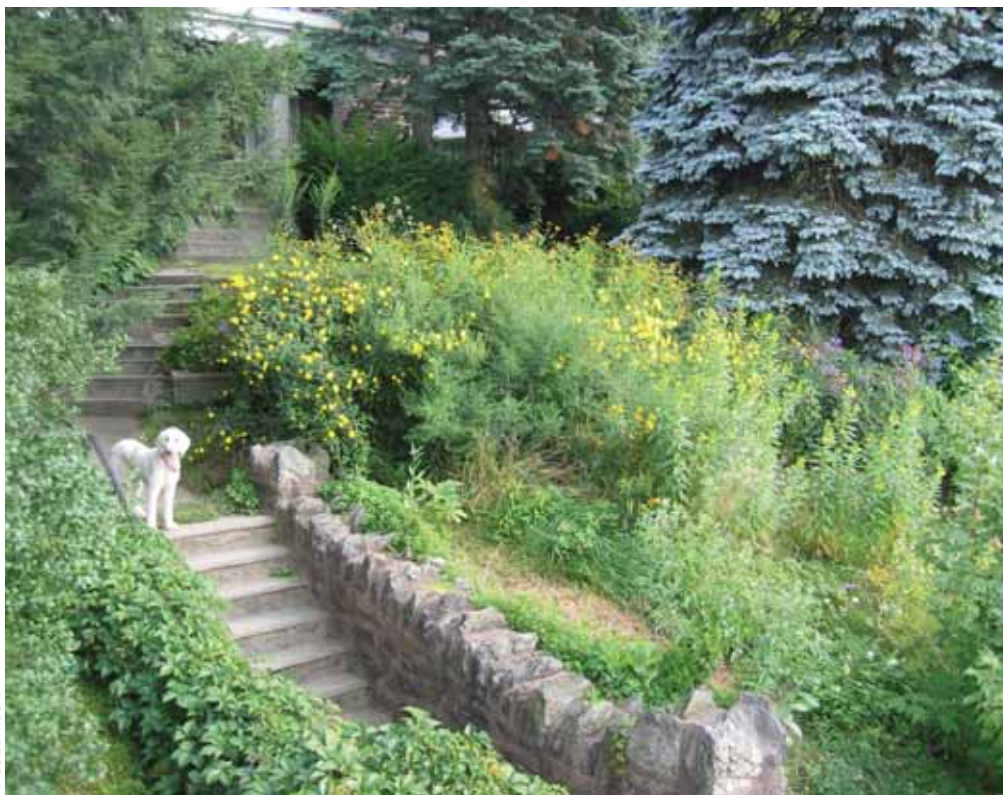
Each addition and subtraction in the garden seems to bring with it a new set of insects and other organisms that linger oblivious to the passing traffic of this busy road. As a true urban sanctuary, the sounds of birds and crickets mix with those of the human kind, like the sounds of little Joe and his parents playing on the lawn.

The Dockweller's favorite project was transforming the front lawn into a meadow. Doc loves the fact that it saves



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The front yard before — sterile and lifeless.



The front yard after — meadow in place, rich with biodiversity.

him mowing time (what lawn remains is trimmed with a manual reel mower) and smells like the country when you walk up the front steps. It also serves as a very visible demonstration garden to street level observers, complete with a sign that reads “Meadow in Progress.” Tavis and Doc feel it is important for people to understand what “could be” in contrast with a perspective of a property that is overgrown or unkempt. They have made

efforts to foster a neighborly appreciation for natives and it has worked; the neighbors no longer think the Dockwillers are crazy. More important, the immediate community now has an understanding of the interesting patch of native sunflowers, ironweed, butterfly-weed, and lupine that add color and texture to their streetscape.

NOTES



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For the busy family in an urban environment, Tavis offers these ideas to help create a healthy habitat.

- Tackle one area at a time. Fill bare areas in the garden as plants become available.
- Don't plant shrubs and trees in the heat of summer. Wait until autumn.
- City-funded programs such as "Tree Tenders" can aid in the planting of trees in your yard or community.
- Trees like the endangered American chestnut often do well in urban settings because they are isolated from potential sources of destructive blight (fungus) or other diseases.
- Rescue stone like schist and bluestone from construction sites before they are hauled to dumps.
- Just because your neighbors enlist the services of lawn care companies doesn't mean you have to as well. Keep your property chemical free; native plants will lead the way!



Butterfly-weed serves as a valuable addition to the native garden.

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