

From *Landscape Lessons: A Practical and Inspirational Primer for the Southern Soil and Soul*

by: Patricia Godwin Dunleavy

© 2009 Patricia Godwin Dunleavy

TerraType Press, LLC

www.TerraTypePress.com

LESSON 29 April 2–8

Lawns

I spent part of the afternoon trying to decide who, in the absurdist drama of lawn mowing, was Sisyphus. Me? The case could certainly be made. Or was it the grass, pushing up through the soil every week, one layer of cells at a time, only to be cut down and then, perversely, encouraged (with lime, fertilizer, etc.) to start the whole doomed process over again?

—Michael Pollan (b. 1955)

Second Nature: A Gardener's Education

Changing Your Lawn Paradigm Is Preferred

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR when most folks think about grass—not ornamental grass or prairie grass, but turf grass—you know, the plant that, when joined with millions of colleagues, will create, one hopes, a lush, verdant carpet of uniform color and texture—a lawn. As one gets out the mower, one ponders the perennial question: how do I achieve this mainstay of pastoral scenes, this progenitor of springtime frolic, this bastion of the western landscape?

First, there are many grasses, and in selecting the variety that best suits your site and desired effect, you need to consider several questions, with your answers leading you to the proper grass for your needs. Is your lawn in sun or shade or both? Does it tend to be wet or dry? Do you like broad- or thin-bladed grass? Do you want it to be naturally long or short, fast or slow growing? Is your lawn frequented by dogs and clambering children, or is it a space for display and ornamentation? Do you prefer a green veneer year-round, or can you live with brown in the winter?

Answer these questions before you purchase your grass. Then check the labels, seek advice, and pray that you select the prime variety to fill all your needs and desires.

So much for basic knowledge—knowing the right questions. While you ponder the questions, but before entering into or continuing to maintain your codependent relationship with your lawn, know that it will require lots of work—sweat for the hardy, perspiration for the more genteel. Soil preparation, seeding, fertilizing, liming, mowing, aerating, mowing, mowing, dethatching, mowing, mowing—oh, and watering. And edging. And reseeding. And weed control. And pest control. And mowing—ear-rattling, brain-busting, mowing.

What about those bills? No big deal, really. You can pay the store for a mower, gas, fertilizer, lime, pre-emergent, post-emergent, herbicide, and fungicide; and *you* can sweat. Or you can pay a lawn maintenance company for these items and *they* can sweat. Either way, add the cost of your public water or the cost of electric power for your private well pump, and the bottom line is essentially the same—time, money, and energy, all expended on a risky race for oftentimes environmentally harmful turf. Why? Why anchor your landscape on such a costly, high-maintenance element?

Maybe it's time to change your lawn paradigm—to minimize and functionalize it. Decrease your lawn size, making it a small, manageable, open space to complement the rest of the landscape rather than dominate it. If that's not practical due to children or other activities, create separate lawn spaces in your yard with different functions and different grasses, then select and maintain the grasses accordingly.

A landscape design that includes perennial ground covers and connecting beds will eliminate much unneeded lawn space while preventing soil erosion and greatly enhancing the interest, texture, and beauty of your yard. Grassed areas that abut beds with rounded edges will simplify mowing since the design will eliminate sharp corners that require the best in mower finesse. And isolated trees and shrubs, a/k/a forlorn flora, when grouped together in islands and joined with mulch or a ground cover (eliminating even more unnecessary lawn), will no longer be subject to the ravages of mower blades. Most important, reduced grass areas also reduce water usage—grass is a water hog.

Now that your consciousness has been raised and you're contemplating your new awareness and willingness to act, go ahead

and prepare your lawn mower. It's time. Be sure the blades are sharp since dull blades rip and shred the grass, leaving it more susceptible to pests and diseases.

IT'S A MATTER OF FACT

In Michael Pollan's must-read book about our food chain and choices, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, he says that "the existential challenge facing grasses in all but the most arid regions is how to successfully compete against trees for territory and sunlight. The evolutionary strategy they hit upon was to make their leaves nourishing and tasty to animals who in turn are nourishing and tasty to us, the big-brained creature best equipped to vanquish the trees on their behalf. . . . [The grasses] developed a deep root system and a ground-hugging crown that in many cases puts out runners, allowing [them] to recover quickly from fire and to reproduce even when grazers (or lawnmowers) prevent them from ever flowering and going to seed. (I used to think we were dominating the grass whenever we mowed the lawn, but in fact we're playing right into its strategy for world domination, by helping it outcompete the shrubs and trees.)"

Whether you will be mowing a large or small area of grass—have you changed your paradigm yet?—you will undoubtedly want to know how to create and maintain it.

- Prepare the lawn area thoroughly before planting, pulverizing the soil and tilling in amendments before broadcasting seeds and fertilizer. If you take the time and effort the first time, you should not have to redo this initial planting (unless you fail to maintain your lawn).
- Plant warm-season turfgrasses starting in late March/early April and continuing through the summer for lawns that will be green during spring, summer, and fall until frost. This group includes common bermudagrass, zoysiagrass, centipedegrass, and St. Augustinegrass.
- Plant cool-season turfgrasses during March/early April after the danger of hard freezes has passed. These grasses grow best during spring and fall and include bluegrass

and tall fescue. Note, however, that these grasses are ideally planted in the fall. If you plant them in the spring, you will probably have to reseed in the fall since they will not become established well enough before the summer heat. Plant annual ryegrasses, which are used to overseed for green lawns in the winter, September through November.

- Lay sod lawns anytime except when grass is going into or coming out of dormancy. Some hybrid grasses are available in sod form only. Before laying sod, be sure to properly prepare the ground, which requires tedious leveling, raking to remove rocks, and rolling.
- Make the last application of fertilizer to cool-season grasses during March or April. Start fertilization again in the fall. Do not fertilize these grasses in the summer.
- Make the first application of fertilizer to warm-season grasses during March or April, continuing a fertilization program through July.
- Time successive fertilizer applications depending upon the fertilizer used. Slow-release fertilizers give a more even nitrogen release, making the lawn grow more consistently and uniformly.
- Apply pre-emergents for weed control now, *if* the temperature has not reached a steady 65°F or higher. Read the label to be sure it's what you need.
- Apply some post-emergents now, *if* the temperatures are above 65°F but below 85°F. Again, read the label.
- On your first mowing run, set the blades low. This will allow more sunlight to warm the soil and encourage warm-season grass growth. It also will help clean out some old, dead growth.
- After that first mower run, raise the blades—to encourage longer grass to shade the soil and prevent moisture loss. Also, longer grass will develop deeper roots to withstand drought and fight weeds.
- Lime the lawn if necessary to reach the proper pH for your grass selection so it will absorb nutrients and grow properly. Since lime is cheap, don't skimp.

- Water the lawn if there hasn't been significant rainfall in a week. Be sure the sprinkler provides even coverage over the complete lawn, moving the device around if the area is too large for the spray spread. (If this is the case, shame on you and see the beginning of this lesson.) Watering should be thorough, with the water reaching deep to the roots rather than merely wetting the surface.
- Watch for diseases and damaging insects. Fungus diseases are common when we have a prolonged cool, moist spring. Consult your local Cooperative Extension Service agent for diagnosis of grass ailments and recommended chemical control.

Did I say *chemical* control? I guess that puts me right back where I was earlier. As you may have detected, while I am not a fan of massive, manicured lawns, I do think perfected lawns have a place in the landscape, on a small scale. But I hope you will consider the dangers lawns pose to you, your family, your pets, and our environment. The constant application of non-organic fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides saturates the soil with these chemicals that leach into surrounding areas and underground water supplies. They also lie quietly on your lawn, waiting for children and pets to roll all over them, leaving residues on clothes, bodies, and hands. They can be toxic.

There are some organic alternatives to familiar lawn care products. There are some design alternatives for the landscape to minimize manicured lawn space. There are some low-maintenance ground cover alternatives to the high-maintenance grasses. And there are varying attitudes about lawns. Sally [Wasowski's] Axiom (from her *Requiem for a Lawnmower*) says it all: "The more boring the front yard, the greater the need for upkeep and maintenance."

DISEASES, PESTS, AND WEEDS

EVERY LAWN HAS THEM—diseases, pests, and weeds. In response, most folks apply chemicals—with labels that say things like "Always wear protective clothing when applying . . . DANGER!!! . . . Keep away from children, pets, and all other living things . . . except those you intend to harm." I made that last part up, but you get the picture,

I'm sure. Before your next chemical application, think about trying organic measures or applicants—and read this lesson about lawns again. But if you must proceed, at least read the label and follow the directions, and be sure you know what you're trying to kill. Just as the maintenance of a manicured lawn is daunting, so are the diseases, pests, and weeds that plague them. Here are some common ailments that your local Cooperative Extension Service agent can help you identify:

Diseases: brown patch, dollar spot, pythium blight, gray leaf spot, fairy ring, centipede decline.

Pests: ground pearls, mole crickets, white grubs, billbugs, spittlebugs, chinch bugs, sod webworms, armyworms, cutworms. Some pests don't damage the lawn but are attracted to it and are a nuisance: cicada killer wasp, earwigs, millipedes, centipedes, sowbugs, and pillbugs.

Weeds: black medic, creeping buttercup, carpetweed, common chickweed, mouse-ear chickweed, white clover, common crabgrass, silver crabgrass, dandelion, curly dock, henbit, pennywort, knotweed, nutsedge, amallow, oxalis, purslane, spurge, thistle, veronica (speedwell), broad-leaved plantain, quack grass, shepherd's purse, red sorrel, tree saplings.

And then there's moss and algae. Moss, although pesky in a lawn, can be a cushiony, enticing ground cover itself, especially in pathways. Consider the possibilities before trying to destroy it.



We used to have goats at the Loganville farm to “mow” areas overgrown with kudzu, privet, thorny vines, and other undesirables. We enjoy cows, a/k/a grazers, at our Madison County farm.