Reduce Lawn Area, Increase Pollinator Habitat

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Take a ride around a newer neighborhood and you're likely to see lots that contain a house with a few shrubs, possibly a tree, and the rest lawn. Expansive lawns have become the norm but at my house, we're taking steps to reduce our lawn area. Why, you ask? While we do need some turfgrass for our three dogs (and revolving door of foster dogs) to use, much of the lawn goes unused. Turfgrass requires more inputs, like fertilizers, herbicides, and fungicides, than most other landscape plants. It can be quite finicky, requires constant maintenance, and provides little ecological value. This has led us to think differently about our yard and how it is managed.

I always recommend people start small when taking on any landscaping project. Small projects are more likely to be successful, which will give you confidence to take on another project. If you experience failure, it will be more difficult to tackle another project. While I envision my yard having much less turfgrass in the future, we chose to reclaim three areas this year, a total of approximately 625 square feet. Two of the areas were constructed with transplants and have a more manicured look while the third was planted with wildflower seeds, which provides a more natural, or perhaps wild look.

The goal of the new areas is to increase the aesthetic appearance of the yard in a manner that requires less maintenance than turfgrass, protects our natural resources, and provides habitat for pollinators and other beneficial insects. Plant selection is key to achieving this goal.

A succession of blooming flowers provides a stable source of food for beneficial insects, which means you'll want to incorporate flowers that bloom at different times during the year, not just in the summer. Whenever possible, utilize native plants as research demonstrates that native plants support many times the number of beneficial insects as non-native plants. Not only is it important to have flowers blooming over as long a time period as possible, it's also important to have a variety of flower shapes, colors, plant heights, and growth habits. If you're especially interested in butterflies, be sure to include the host plants. These are the plants the developing caterpillars feed on until they are ready to go through metamorphosis to become an adult butterfly. This also means you must be tolerant of damage to your plants. The developing caterpillars have voracious appetites and while your plants may appear decimated, most seem to tolerate the grazing just fine.

According to the Xerces Society, providing wildflower-rich habitat is the most significant action you can take to support pollinators. For this reason, one of our three new areas was planted with wildflower seeds. There are a plethora of wildflower seed mixes available so you'll need to put some thought into what fits best with your situation. If you're using the area as a lawn alternative, consider a seed mix with species that remain relatively low to the ground which won't be such a dramatic change from turfgrass and also satisfies any lawn-height ordinances or HOA regulations. If too much variety is unappealing, you might try a mix of just two seeds such as Black-eyed Susan and Purple Coneflower. There are even deer resistant wildflower seed mixes for those whose gardens seem to be a deer buffet. We elected to use a mix containing 25 wildflowers, both annuals and perennials, that are drought tolerant. This seems to have been a good choice given the lack of precipitation in May.

If you prefer to grow rather than mow, consider swapping a patch of turfgrass for pollinator habitat. Need some resources to help you get started? The Xerces Society website (www.xerces.org) contains region specific plant lists, conservation guides, information on bee identification and more. Clemson Cooperative Extension's Home and Garden Information Center (www.clemson.edu/hgic) also hosts a number of fact sheets related to attracting pollinators and

beneficial insects. I guarantee that if you build it, they will come! Instead of mowing, you can relax while watching the butterflies and bees gathering pollen and nectar from beautiful flowers.

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