LawnLess/LessLawn

Strategies towards a more Biologically Valuable Landscape

by Tammany Baumgarten
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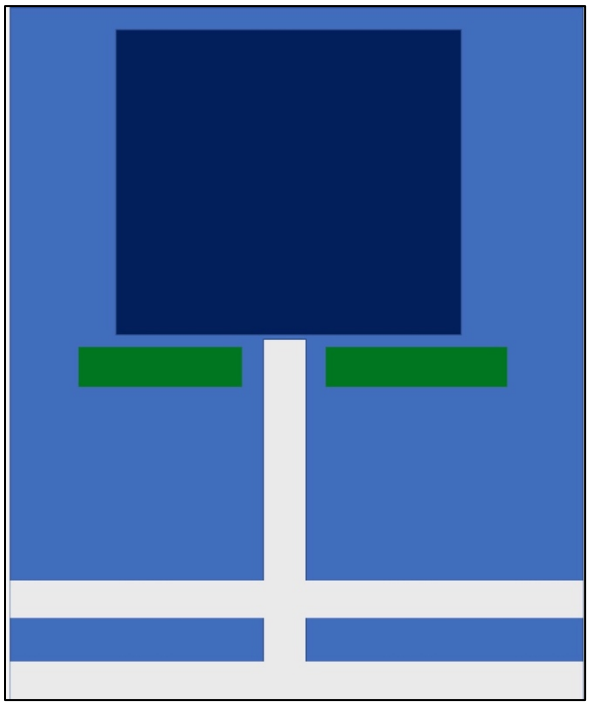
Having heard about the ecological crises that insects and birds are facing and the cataclysmic declines that are being reported, many home and property owners feel compelled to do something with their property that helps address and heal the natural fabric. This forces an examination of our landscaping and how we can make it more biologically inviting and supportive. For many decades, due to various cultural reasons and influences, turfgrass has been the default option and predominant element of American landscapes. A small border of shrubbery, "the "mustache," a token tree and an expansive lawn covering the rest is the most basic and most common landscape we see. Even in sophisticated designs, lawn tends to dominate most arrangements.

To quote Doug Tallamy, ***"Lawn is an ecological dead zone."*** Tallamy goes on to say that lawn doesn't do any of the things that we need every landscape to do:

- **sequester carbon**
- **manage the watershed**
- **support a food web**
- **support pollinators**

"Lawn is the worst plant choice for all of this, and we've got over 40 million acres of lawn (a 2005 statistic)." Tallamy does not even get into the vast amount of harmful air pollution and exhaust emissions that are produced by lawn equipment, particularly primitive 2-cyle engines like those in most leaf-blowers, weed-wackers and trimmers. The argument proceeds to enumerate the many benefits of replacing poorly performing aspects of our landscape with native plants which are proven to provide all of the ecological services that are so badly needed.

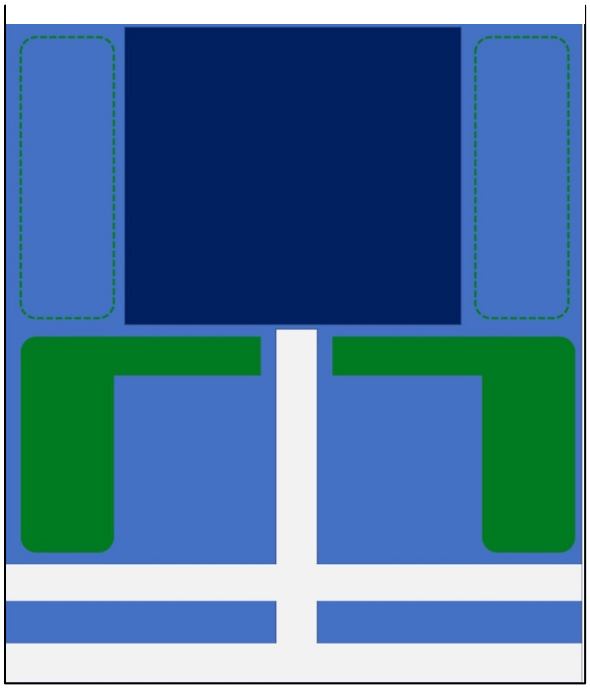
Reducing or eliminating the lawn areas of a landscape can go a long way towards these goals and makes a good jumping off point. Less lawn generally means more garden, more plants, more diversity, more biological value. Think outside of the box! The vast majority of land has been subdivided into lots and arranged more or less in a grid pattern which leaves most property owners with a square shape to design. In most cases, the structure, house or otherwise is situated in the middle. These diagrams show various ways to decrease lawn areas, create more gardens and increase the biological value in remaining lawn areas.



The Mustache: A small border of shrubbery, "the "mustache," a token tree and an expansive lawn covering the rest is the most basic and most common landscape we see.

The "Mustache" is typical of many basic landscape design where a simple row of non-native, evergreen shrubbery lines the front perimeter of a structure, leaving the remainder of the "green" space as lawn. These diagrams represent a Front Yard sample landscape where we turn the standard *"Wall to Wall Carpet"* of the lawn and make it more of a *"Throw Rug."*

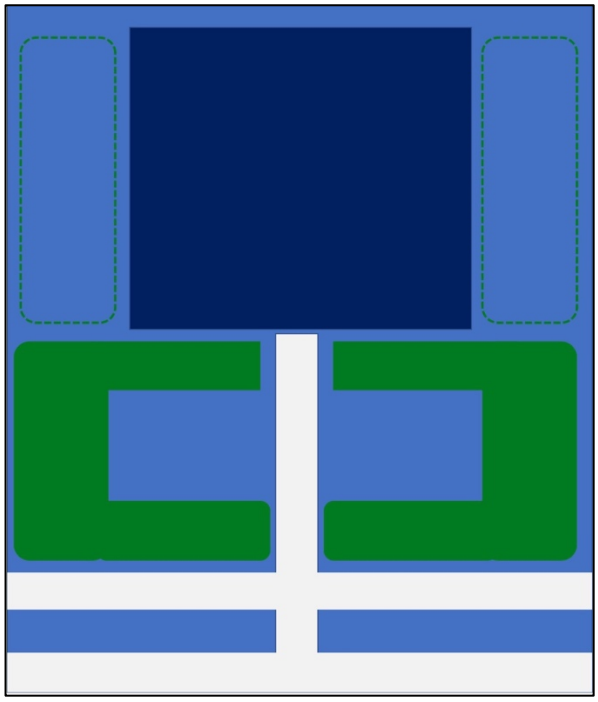
Because native and naturalistic landscaping still is not aesthetically appreciated by some, these diagrams help to offer a traditional contour, traditional shapes that help the design be legible, understood and can help downplay the "wilder" plants within the design. The shape of backyard landscaping is more flexible and can vary quite a bit depending on how it is used..PARTY IN THE BACK!.....we'll save that for next time!



The Dog-leg: Initial stages of expanding garden and reducing lawn might look like this. Don't forget the side yards which are a great place to create a nature trail!

The "Dogleg" is one way to increase the area of garden, adding a greater diversity of plant material and replacing small amount of lawn with beneficial plants. Evergreen plants can be used to hold the intention and shape of the design even in winter.

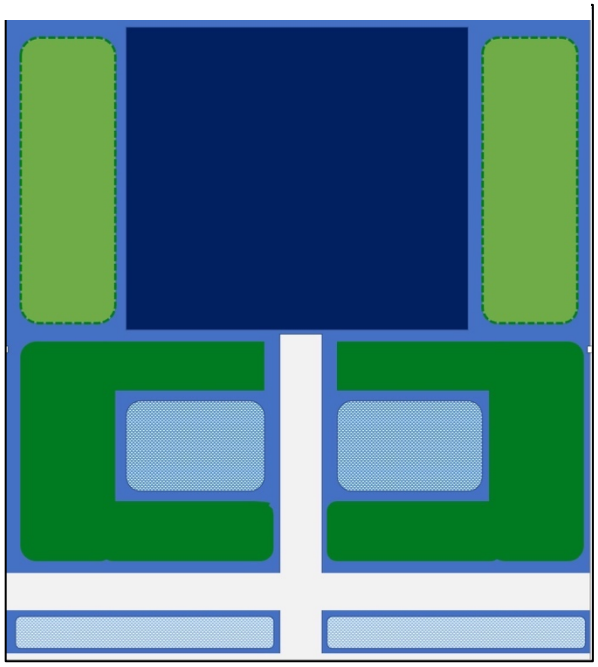
Note that the sides of the structure can present a great opportunity for native plantings. Often this unused space on the sides is partially shaded by the structure and/or fences making it not so ideal for turf grass anyway. These areas are not as visible to passersby, so may be used for some of the looser, less "attractive" native plants that nonetheless have high ecological value. These linear, narrow spaces are great for a Nature Trail type plant arrangement with a pathway leading down the middle of plantings on both sides



The Horseshoe

The "Horseshoe" expands the garden areas even more, gobbling up even more lawn space and making more area for valuable plants. If evergreen plants are used strategically, some of our best deciduous native can be placed behind them without affecting the legibility of the design.

Care must be taken on the far edges that lines-of-sight are not impaired. Make sure that your neighbors can see over your garden when backing out of their driveways. Make sure that cars pulling up to a stop sign can see around the corner. Always keep plants on the front corners low enough for people and drivers to see over.



Plug mowable natives into remaining lawn areas. Compare to the Mustache and see how much biological value has been added!

In the remaining turf areas, there are ways to create biological value while still having a space that is mowed. A portion of the landscape where the eye can rest helps make an arrangement pleasing to the human eye, so a little "lawn" actually helps make the garden attractive and legible.

Mow What Grows: Your turf area does not have to be a perfect tapestry. Avoid using herbicides and pesticides. These are harmful, costly chemicals and prohibit the growth of some "pretty weeds" that you and pollinators will enjoy.

Mow high and less frequently. Insects and many low growing native plants can survive a high mowing every 3 weeks or so.

Plug in some *mowables*, native plants that can handle mowing and still live and bloom.

In the final iteration of your "box," look how much lawn area has been eliminated! If designed with an abundance of appropriate native plants, the garden can be full and relatively low maintenance while providing SO much to the environment that the Lawn did not.

Mowables and More

These native plants can live in a lawn area and withstand mowing. Some are stand alone, but others have significant dormant periods that preclude them being used solely as a "lawn." These are better used in a mix.

Common Violet, *Viola sororia*

These plants often appear in partly shaded, moist areas where lawn is thin anyway, so go with it! These plants are also suitable as a "green mulch," re-seeding and covering open ground and helping to prevent unwanted weeds. It is a host plant for Variegated Frittilary Butterflies within their range.

Lyre-leaf Sage, *Salvia lyrata*

Early spring blooms on 1-2' stalks, this plant has a lovely, purplish winter basal rosette that helps cover open ground; a sort of "green mulch," re-seeding under and between plants, it can be plugged into a lawn and allowed to re-seed around in the lawn and garden beds. Like most salvias, this plant is popular with pollinators of all kinds.

Showy Primrose, *Oenothera* (ee-no-ther-a) *speciosa*

Sometimes called Buttercup, this sun-lover is common on roadsides and adapted to lean, hot soils. It has large, showy pink blooms in early Spring. It is rhizomatous and can spread quickly through a garden via shallow suckering roots. Beautiful spring wildflower. Popular with pollinators.

Powderpuff, *Mimosa strigilosa*

This sun-lover can be seen in the warmer season on neutral grounds and roadsides. It can handle dry, intense heat where other plants cannot. It is a tough, aggressive spreader via surface runners and can cover ground quickly in a grade setting, so perhaps best in this lawn application or select areas. Popular with pollinators and people when in bloom

Frogfruit, *Phyla nodiflora*

This low-growing groundcover is evergreen in our area, grows 5-6" tall and is beloved by small pollinators for it's dainty white blossoms. It is also the host plant for at least one butterfly the Phaon Crescent. It can handle high mowing and dry spells well once established, but it really thrives in wet conditions. It is an aggressive rambler, rooting where stems touch soil and can overtake a garden bed quickly. Best used by itself for this reason, or planted to spill from window boxes or hanging baskets.

Salt-Marsh Aster, *Symphotricum subulatum*

This small aster often just appears and is noticeable in mown areas at the end of the season, around October and can be as low as 2-4 inches in full bloom! It is an annual species that relies on reseeding to return the following year. All asters are extremely valuable to wildlife.

Sedges (Carex species) and other Grasses or Grass-like plants, low Groundcovers

While these plants don't necessarily like being mown, they are *grass-like* and some are short enough and expand to look like a "lawn" when planted densely and/or allowed to spread. Blue-eyed grass, Piney Woods Dropseed, Carex blanda, Carex flaccosperma, Carex leavenworthii are grasses or grass-like. Prunella and Spotted Twinflowers are low -ish groundcovers to consider.