

NATURALLY: Take a Pass on Grass

- By Ryan Reed For the Gazette
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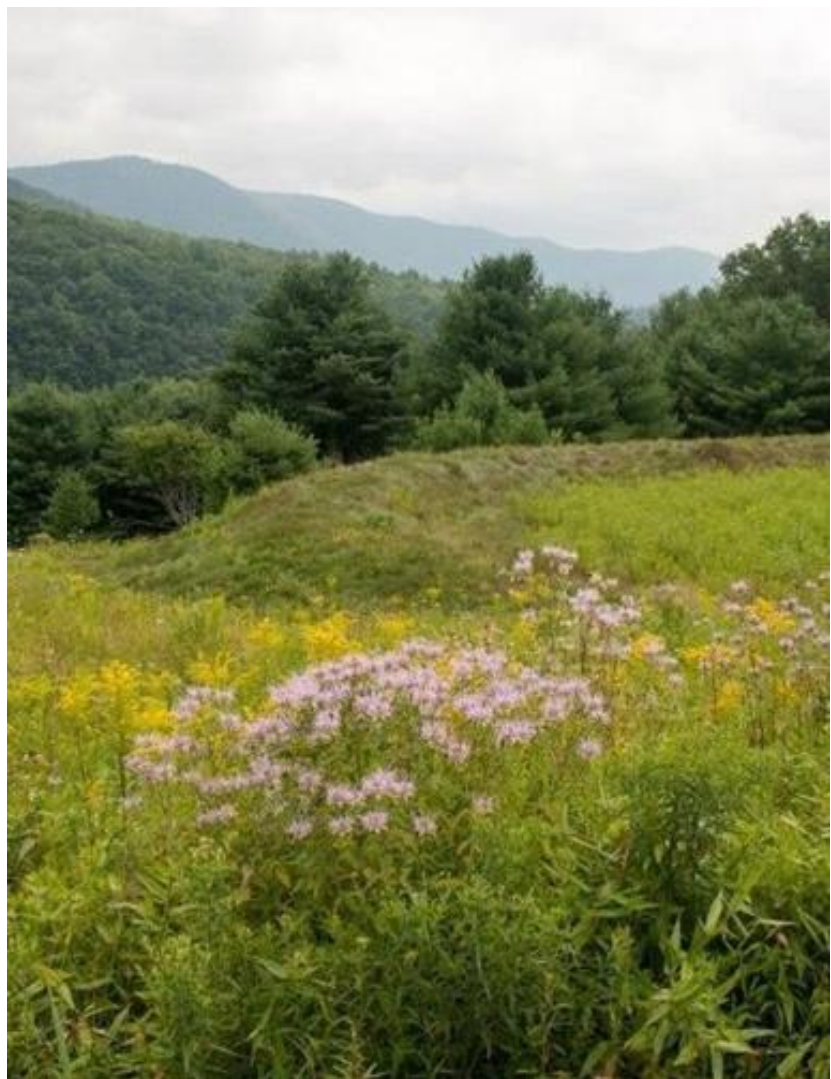
This 1/5 acre of lawn separating two properties would make a great spot to plant native trees and shrubs.
Submitted photo

The idea that homes be surrounded by expanses of lawn is older than America itself. Stately manors of the Old World had a common attribute — large, grassy buffers. What better way to see the enemy approaching from afar? Associated with the upper class and firmly engrained in settlers' land use ideology, grassy lawns became ubiquitous here, for better or worse.

Acknowledging that land clearing must be done in order to build homes and businesses, it can be argued that this practice goes too far when it prescribes vast amounts of lawn. It seems we are beyond the days when lawns had utility in spotting advancing rival armies, after all. Perhaps lawns should be examined under the lens of more pressing issues of our modern era, like climate change.

Conversion of forests to lawns always results in a net loss of carbon-capturing capacity, biodiversity, and habitat for animals. As if this weren't bad enough, maintaining lawns increases air and water pollution by burning fuels (i.e. mowing) and using inordinate quantities of fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides to maintain them. Lawns also increase runoff and contribute to erosion and sedimentation of streams. Put simply, lawns are an ecological "Pandora's box" that require further environmental degradation for their upkeep.

Estimates of "unnecessary" lawn acreage (those lawns not used for sports and other play) exceed tens of millions for



After the new Tiadaghton State Forest Resource Management Center was built, a native perennial and wildflower mix was used, establishing an eco-friendly habitat without diminishing the view.

Submitted photo

East Coast U.S. states, alone. Imagine the impact if we all committed to replanting native trees in some of these areas! Not only would we harm the environment less, but this could also help mitigate many environmental issues. Ancillary benefits would include more wildlife habitat, more shade, less noise, and better human mental health.

Perhaps an area of lawn is not conducive for replanting trees due to regulations or other concerns. No matter! There are hundreds of options for planting native shrubs, perennials, wildflower mixes, and low (or no) maintenance grasses and groundcovers.

Native perennials and wildflowers also aid vital pollinators like butterflies and bees. Even planting a vegetable garden would be a better option than lawn. Un-mowed areas also accumulate more soil carbon (helping with climate change) while increasing water infiltration and thereby decreasing runoff.

If you own land with a lawn component, you have the power to help mitigate many environmental problems. Consider starting small and adding on year by year. Before too long, you'll have a native plant oasis that seamlessly ties in with the native ecosystem. Be sure to check out native plant and tree options by visiting the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' website page, [Landscaping with Native Plants](#), and this spring let's all take a pass on grass.

Ryan Reed is a Natural Resource Program Specialist with the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The Naturally column is brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in the area.