

lawn-free

A growing number of people are replacing their grass with more eco-friendly and diverse alternatives

By Virginia Myers / Photos by Laura-Chase McGehee

Tearing up a conventional expanse of neatly mowed lawn—that hallmark of suburbia—once was considered an act more likely inspired by *Mother Earth News* than by *Garden Design*. But area landscape designers say an increasing number of homeowners are trading grass for ground cover, shrubs and even edible plants, a shift away from the monoculture of grass toward options that can be more eco-friendly.

Some people ditch the lawn because they dread mowing. Others prefer the textures, colors and shapes of a less conventional garden. Many cite environmental stewardship as their reason for going “green.” Flowers, berries, bushes and trees attract and support birds and other wildlife, require few or no chemical fertilizers and insecticides to thrive, and, depending on plant selection, can help absorb rainwater runoff that could pollute area rivers and, eventually, the Chesapeake Bay. Choosing native plants reduces the need for watering. Plus, when there’s no need to mow, you can say goodbye to the engine exhaust and Sunday morning roar of the lawnmower. The following examples of lawn-free yards show just how beautiful this approach can be. ▶



Jeff Tyeryar and Dan Gillespie transformed a standard-issue suburban yard into an idyllic garden featuring meandering paths and creative stonework.



Leslie Miles, shown here with husband Jayson Schwam and daughter Elena, wanted a yard that looked “completely wild and natural.”



The yard of Laura DeBruce and her husband, Jeff Blackman, is beautiful but also kid- and dog-friendly.

Native Jungle

Thick with ostrich ferns, liriop (a tuft-style, foot-tall grass) and daylilies, and partly shaded by American elms, Leslie Miles' Bethesda yard is a riot of textures and colors, with plants of varying heights filling every space. The steep slope just off the front porch of the Victorian-style home is anchored by large rocks, though most of these are hidden by lush plantings. One small strip of trimmed grass, invisible from the street, is wide enough for a lawn chair and not much else. With clover and wildflowers mixed in, the miniature “lawn” becomes just one element of a diverse palette. “I want it to look completely wild and natural,” Miles says.

Why did she take out the original lawn? “I find this aesthetically way more attractive,” she explains, adding that she and her husband, Jayson Schwam, were concerned about the environmental impact of fertilizing, mowing and watering a more traditional turf, a choice she calls “horrible.” The garden lessens the possibility that rainwater runoff from her property could pollute the Potomac River, just steps away from the homes in this Glen Echo

Heights neighborhood. “The next thing we’re going to do is replace the driveway” with a permeable surface, she adds, noting that the existing blacktop becomes a torrent of runoff in a hard rain.

With the help of John Snitzer of Snitzer Landscaping in Dickerson, Miles and Schwam incorporated other natural elements into their yard: An oak tree destroyed by careless contractors became a rustic bench in the back, and the garden is full of native plantings that typically require less maintenance and watering. Among them are witch hazel, oakleaf hydrangea, sweet bay and Southern magnolia, dogwood and sassafras. “I think it’s more natural than a garden where everything’s clipped and subdued,” Snitzer says.

Let the Children Play

After living overseas for 12 years, Chevy Chase residents Laura DeBruce and her husband, Jeff Blackman, wanted to capture the spirit of the gardens they had enjoyed in the Provence region of France and the Tuscany region of Italy. The couple lives with their 12-year-old son and a golden retriever, so they told designers

they wanted a yard that was “very livable, very beautiful, but also a place that would be very kid- and dog-friendly,” DeBruce says. Blackman wanted to minimize the impact on the environment, too.

DeBruce and Blackman hired Laura Will and Adele O’Dowd of Willow Landscape Design in Chevy Chase. O’Dowd combined relatively formal plantings with whimsical central elements, like an existing rope swing hanging from an old black walnut tree in the front yard. “The swing has been there for quite a long time, even before Laura and Jeff moved here,” says O’Dowd, who lives down the street. Since grass never grew under the swing, which was well used by neighborhood children, O’Dowd installed off-white pea gravel and repeated the element in pathways that cross what once was a conventional lawn. One strip of gravel has become a bocce court.

Sky Pencil hollies and skyrocket junipers, each mimicking the shape of Italian cypress, are clustered at the apex of two walkways and near the front stone steps. Foot-tall boxwoods frame the perimeter of the entire yard, their size



Debra Gilmore's front yard beckons even though it doesn't include a single blade of grass.



Ruth Kaplan planted a profusion of perennials to create the cottage garden she always wanted.

intended to keep the garden from feeling too formal.

Garden care is limited to a bit of mulching and occasional gravel raking and replacement. The gravel slows runoff to protect the rivers, and diverse plantings attract wildlife.

A slate porch overlooking the front yard extends the width of the house. Wide steps descend into the yard, making the porch feel open and accessible and a part of the garden, but it sits high enough to observe the action from a safe distance. A small cafe table on the porch invites visitors to stop and chat. Since the designers are friends and neighbors, they do that frequently, watching their children play and enjoying the garden.

Places to Go

When Jeff Tyeryar and Dan Gillespie decided to renovate their yard, they went all out. The corner lot on Edgewood Road in Kensington was transformed from mundane lawn to lush, tiered levels of exotics and natives. Other elements include rock walls that Tyeryar built himself, strategically placed sculpture and one enor-

mous standing rock for dramatic effect.

Tyeryar and Gillespie perceive the garden as several rooms: a forest glade, a Japanese-style rain garden, and the cloister—an area in the back with a statue of Pan and bordered by an arbor. They entertain on a back patio and have toy saber fights with their 7-year-old son in an open area.

Much of the garden is designed to absorb excess water and negotiate the steep slopes endemic to the property. A bog empties into a pond stocked with carp, and a dry stream bed with rock bridges fills up during rains, redirecting water to the bog. On a hill that was “nothing but grass,” Tyeryar built rock walls to break up the slope.

The amount of work that has gone into this garden is remarkable—and Tyeryar and Gillespie did it all themselves. “We’re pretty insane about it,” admits Gillespie, who maintains a greenhouse on the property and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the many exotic and native plants he has installed. He points out some of the more interesting varieties: upside-down fern, red-tipped photinias that have grown

from one-gallon pots to a towering screen of shrubbery, and varieties of banana and palm that survive Maryland winters.

Why switch from grass? “I hate mowing,” Gillespie says. “Grass is boring...there are so many more interesting things you could be growing,” Tyeryar agrees. “I grew up [playing] in the woods and I wanted something that conveyed a much more natural landscape than a quarter acre of mowed grass. I wanted the feeling of walking in the garden and going on a voyage.”

Breaking with Convention

“Lawn is nice if you’re going to recreate on it,” Debra Gilmore says. “But a front lawn is not used for recreation. It’s a very formal barrier.”

Not Gilmore’s garden, which breaks up the relative monotony of postage-stamp lawns along a line of townhomes on Gateway Terrace in Potomac. With nary a blade of grass, the collection of shrubs, flowers, ground cover and trees is warm and inviting. Inspired in part by her late first husband’s expertise as a botanist, Gilmore has long been a gardener and increasingly chooses natural

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approaches to growing. She says she did spray Roundup to begin eliminating the lawn, then pulled out the grass, tilled the earth and added finely ground pine mulch and a coating of “black gold” earthworm castings. To get rid of grass in the backyard, she made “lawn lasagna,” a layering of cardboard packing boxes that suffocated the grass.

Gilmore used her own creative instincts (she is a professional lighting designer) and consulted with friends Sandy Clinton (of Clinton & Associates Landscape Architects in Hyattsville) and Beth Knox (of Greener Than Green Gardens in Takoma Park) to come up with a garden design. Gilmore’s 17-year-old son, Carl, helped her plant.

Central to the yard is the witch hazel tree, which is known in her family as “the birthday tree” because it blooms in February, when Carl was born. Gilmore has planted one at every home she’s had. There is also serviceberry, a popular native tree; hellebore; three types of ferns (Japan-

ese painted, Christmas and ostrich); and luxurious, thick hostas. Steppingstones and gravel facilitate drainage and provide interesting hardscape.

“In our society, everybody thinks everything has to be so neat and tidy,” Gilmore says. “Vacuum the grass. Blow the clippings away.” The variety of plantings in her garden, and the low maintenance that goes with them, are much more appealing to her.

Cottage Garden in Bloom

Ruth Kaplan’s front yard is a bountiful collection of perennial flower beds, each spilling over another in a profusion of color. After living for 30 years in a Mount Pleasant brownstone in Washington, she moved to her bungalow home on Chesapeake Avenue in Silver Spring 10 years ago. Now, she says, she finally has the cottage garden she always wanted.

Kaplan’s choices are based primarily on aesthetics, but eco-friendly principles have become important as well

as she learns more about the environmental impact of diversity in the garden. Working with neighbor Matt Cohen, a professional gardener who runs Matt’s Habitats gardening services of Silver Spring, she has made room for more native plants in her garden, including serviceberry, purple coneflower, bee balm and swamp milkweed, which is great for attracting monarch butterflies. Kaplan also has a vegetable garden, and is planting blueberry bushes in a side bed—part of a growing trend in edible landscaping.

Kaplan enjoys the interest created by her colorful garden, with neighbors frequently stopping to chat. “Hanging out in a front garden connects me with a wider and more diverse community,” says Kaplan, who likes to share the wealth. If you like her larkspur, she says, you can harvest the seeds and plant some of your own. **B**

Virginia Myers lives in Takoma Park.

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