

GRASSES & GROUND COVERS



Lawns are practical and acceptable landscapes that beautify homes and provide pleasure to homeowners. However, recent building trends that have resulted in larger homes on larger properties give cause for concern. In increasing numbers, Michigan landowners are moving from smaller lots to residential sites to rural estates of 10 to 40 acres in size. Lawn sizes have also increased dramatically. This increase in rural estates contributes to habitat fragmentation. This presents a problem for wildlife as extensive lawns of mowed grass have much less benefit to wildlife than an area of similar size with a diversity of plants. However, some wildlife can benefit from small amounts of mowed lawns. Cowbirds, flickers, and robins forage in the short grasses for food. Canada geese, moles, and 13-lined ground squirrels also frequent lawns, but can create nuisance problems with their droppings or burrows.

There are many important reasons to have as small a mowed lawn as possible. Pesticides and fertilizers used to grow grass can contaminate ground and surface water killing valuable plants and insects. Excessive mowing takes extensive time and fuel. Also, other alternatives to mowed grass may be better for the environment and provide more valuable wildlife habitat. Therefore, having a smaller mowed lawn is an important wildlife manage-

ment consideration. This chapter explains how to manage and maintain mowed and unmowed areas of lawn as well as how to develop alternative ground covers of higher quality for wildlife.

Mowed Lawns

Mowed lawns require time and money to maintain. Monocultures of weed-free grass demand a large amount of water, fertilizer, pesticides, and time. They provide less wildlife habitat than do unmowed lawns, and they are easily stressed by extreme drought or wet conditions.

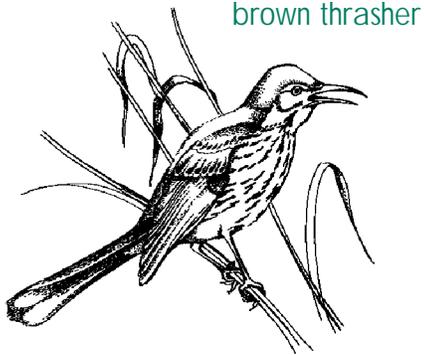
To maintain your lawn in a less-intensive and more environmentally friendly manner, consider accepting a variety of grasses and non-grasses, or remove weeds by hand instead of using herbicides over the entire lawn. Instead of fertilizing, leave the clippings, which will provide nitrogen. Mowing at heights of 2 to 3 inches helps protect roots from summer heat and promotes better grass growth. Another tip: keep mower blades sharp so they cut the grass cleanly and do not tear the plants.

robin



An estimated 70 percent of pesticide use in the United States occurs on the nation's lawns. You can help reduce this number by planting diverse forbs and other plants to provide for a healthier, environmentally friendly lawn, which needs few or no chemicals. Although weeds such as dandelions, plantain, black medic, spurge, orange and yellow hawkweed, and white clover are not acceptable to some landowners that strive to create a uniform lawn, such plants attract a variety of wildlife. Rabbits and deer love clover and will frequent lawns that contain it. Birds use dried stalks of weeds and other plants to build nests and feed on the seeds of some common weeds.

How much lawn you mow should depend on the size and shape, and uses of your property. For example, if you need an area for playing ball or exercising a dog, a long rectangular area may suffice. However, if the only activity on portions of your lawn is mowing, consider converting those areas to an unmowed parcel or wildlife-friendly planting. A wet area, for example, can be

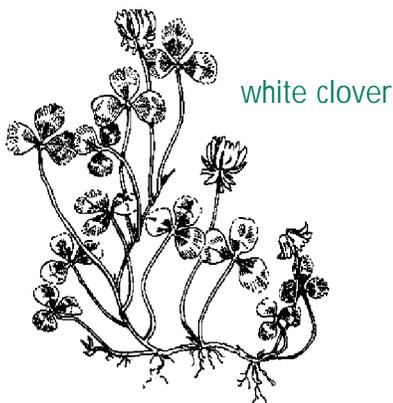


brown thrasher

restored to a wet meadow or wildlife pond. Mixing in areas of trees, shrubs, perennial and annual flowers, unmowed grasses, and prairie grasses will not only add wildlife value but will help contribute to a beautiful landscape that requires less upkeep. Another way to improve value for wildlife is to keep the lawn in an irregular shape, which will provide more edge than a square or rectangular design.

Grasses

Areas with tall, unmowed or infrequently mowed grasses can provide outstanding wildlife habitat such as nesting areas, brooding areas, insect-feeding areas and foraging areas for songbirds, gamebirds, and rabbits. You can create places where you let the grass go wild or where you plant a specific grass type to create a meadow, prairie, or wildflower viewing spot. The flowers will furnish a nectar source for bees and butterflies.



white clover

Grasses such as timothy, orchard grass, red top, or blue grass can be planted to develop a grass meadow two to five feet in height. Adding clovers such as ladino, alsike, white, or medium-red will increase the wildlife value and decrease the overall vegetative height. Clovers help to promote healthy lawns as they are able to fix nitrogen. Planting clovers will develop a meadow that is one to three feet in height. They will create a green open space and allow a pleasing view to the edge of your property. Once a year in late August, mow the mix of grasses and clovers to help maintain the stand and to check the invasion of woody plants. For additional information please refer to the chapter on **Cool Season Grasses** in the Grassland Management section.

Another alternative is to plant a part of your yard to prairie grasses and/or wildflowers. Because native prairie grasses (big bluestem, little bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass) have deep root systems and short underground stems (rhizomes), they help water to percolate through the soil. The process of percolation is important for recharging ground water and supplying plants with adequate water. A manicured lawn, for example, will stop percolating after a half-inch of rain. On the other hand, a native prairie will percolate up to six inches of rain per hour.

Mixing wildflowers in with the prairie grasses adds diversity. Wildflower types to plant include coneflower, black-eyed Susan, leadplant, coreopsis, aster, and blazing star. Prairie grasses and forbs provide forage for deer, rabbits, and woodchucks; nesting sites for pheasants, bobolinks, and field

sparrows; feeding areas for songbirds and wild turkeys, and winter cover for resident wildlife. The wildflowers offer brilliant colors in summer and fall, and the stiff stems and golden-to-rust colors of the prairie grasses make for attractive winter gardens. For additional information please refer to the following chapters: **Wildflowers** and **Wildflower Plantings** in this section, and **Warm Season Grasses** in the Grassland Management section.

Ground Covers

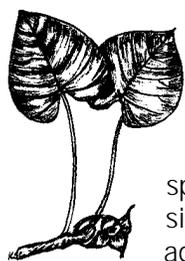
Ground covers offer an ideal opportunity to reduce the amount of mowed lawn surface and to develop low-maintenance wildlife habitat. They provide nest sites for ground-nesting songbirds, and protective cover for rabbits and chipmunks. Such plantings can provide a more manicured appearance while increasing habitat value and reducing maintenance.

A wide variety of species can be used. Preferred plants will depend upon the soil type and the amount of sun or shade the area receives. Shaded areas on clay soils, for example, call for one type of ground cover, while dry areas with all-day sun will need a different kind of ground cover. Native shade-tolerant species include wild ginger, wintergreen, and bearberry. There are many other species of groundcover that are often seen in backyards such as spotted nettle, lily of the valley, vinca,



little bluestem

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wild ginger

myrtle, crown vetch, birds-foot trefoil, and e u o n y m u s .

However, these species will aggressively spread into adjacent areas and will need extensive management and control to reduce their impact to adjacent sites. Therefore, they must be used with caution.

Plant ground covers around homes, trees, swimming pools, and other fragmented habitats. Readily available from nurseries as plugs or plants, they are usually listed by their scientific names, which are included in the accompanying table.

Wet Areas

If your property includes frontage on a lake, river, pond, or wetland, special habitat considerations apply. Leave a buffer strip of unmowed vegetation between your lawn and the wetland or water's edge 100 feet or more in width. The buffer will filter out sediments and lawn fertilizers before they enter the water, and it will provide important niche habitat for a variety of birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles. To beautify the buffer strip and enhance wildlife habitat, plant wildflowers and grasses, or add trees, shrubs, and ground cover.

If you use your lake or pond for swimming, clear an area only large enough for this purpose. Remember, removing or adding soil, sand, or gravel may be subject to regulation -- check with the Michigan Department of Environmental

Quality's (DEQ) Land and Water Management Division before making alterations. Maintain aquatic vegetation in all or a portion of the water frontage. Although control of purple loosestrife, Eurasian watermilfoil, and other aggressive exotic plants may be necessary, retain a mixture of submerged, floating and emergent plants such as wild celery, pondweeds, waterlilies, cattails, and pickerelweed. These plants also help to reduce toxins in the water and increase oxygen and provide the structure and greenery to support snails, insects, and other aquatic food organisms important to fish, turtles, snakes, salamanders, frogs, and toads. If you plan to use a

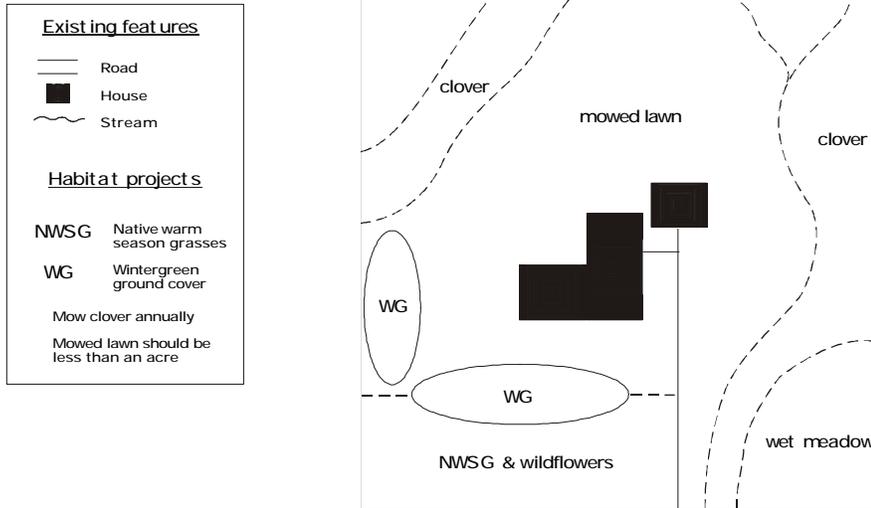
herbicide to control aquatic plants or algae, check with DEQ's Land and Water Management Division to see if a permit is required and always follow product label directions. To protect water quality and reduce the likelihood of excess algae and plant growth, do not dispose of grass clippings, leaves, charcoal briquettes or ashes, or other refuse in the water. In addition, it is important to use little or no fertilizer on your lawn, or switch to a phosphorus-free or low phosphorous brand.

cattail

Common Name	Scientific Name	Origin	Sunlight	Height (ft.)
Wildflowers				
Aster	Aster spp.	Native	Full	4
Rough blazing star	Liatris aspera	Native	Full/Partial Shade	3
Black-eyed Susan	Rudbeckia hirta	Native	Full/Partial Shade	3
Purple coneflowers	Echinacea purpurea	Native	Full/Partial Shade	4
Tall coreopsis	Coreopsis tripteris	Native	Full	3
Lead plant	Amorpha canescens	Native	Full	3
Warm season grasses				
Big-bluestem	Andropogon gerardi	Native	Full	8
Indiangrass	Sorghastrum nutans	Native	Full	6
Little-bluestem	Schizachyrium scoparium	Native	Full	3
Switch grass	Panicum virgatum	Native	Full	5
Cool season grasses				
Canada wild-rye	Elymus canadensis	Native	Full	4
Redtop	Agrostis gigantea	Native	Full	4
Orchard grass	Dactylis glomerata	Not Native	Full	4
Timothy	Phleum pratense	Not Native	Full	3.5
Legumes				
White clover	Trifolium repens	Native	Full/partial	0.5
Ladino	Trifolium var.	Not Native	Full/partial	0.5
Alsike	Trifolium fucatum	Not Native	Full/partial	0.5
Ground Covers				
Bearberry	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi	Native	Full/partial	0.5
Wild Ginger	Asarum canadense	Native	Full/partial	0.5
Wintergreen	Gaultheria procumbens	Native	Full/partial	0.5

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yourself. These diverse plantings improve critical wildlife habitat that attracts songbirds, chipmunks, rabbits, squirrels, toads, frogs, snakes, and turtles.

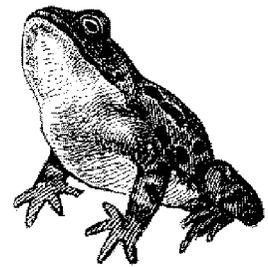


This map is an example that demonstrates the many management options discussed throughout this chapter. The option(s) you choose should depend not only on your goals, but the location, condition, and present use of your land.

Trees along the waterfront provide nesting, resting, and feeding areas for birds and small mammals. When trimming trees, leave enough branches to maintain wildlife habitat and privacy for your home while allowing a view of the water. Enhance the waterfront's habitat value and aesthetic appeal by planting flowering and fruiting shrubs as well as ground cover at the base of trees. Grasses for moist areas include redtop, switchgrass, and prairie cordgrass. Attractive wildflowers that grow in moist areas are cardinal flowers, blue lobelia, and Jack-in-the-Pulpit.

Leave dead trees (snags) that do not create a safety hazard to humans, for woodpeckers and squirrels. Remember, that logs, stumps, and fallen branches are critical wildlife habitat for amphibians and reptiles. See the chapter on **Frogs, Turtles and Snakes** in the Species Management Section for more details.

In conclusion, by using a variety of vegetative types such as tall grasses, ground covers, trees, and shrubs, you can create a beautiful yard and reduce your work load. You will also create a better environment for a variety of wildlife and



FOR ADDITIONAL CHAPTERS CONTACT:
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Private Land Partnerships: This partnership was formed between both private and public organizations in order to address private lands wildlife issues. Individuals share resources, information, and expertise. This landowner's guide has been a combined effort between these groups working towards one goal: Natural Resources Education. We hope this manual provides you with the knowledge and the motivation to make positive changes for our environment.

FOR ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE: CONTACT YOUR LOCAL CONSERVATION DISTRICT