

Chapter 1

Designing Your Perfect Lawn

In This Chapter

- Determining the size and shape of your lawn
 - Deciding where to put your lawn
 - Using lawns to make your yard look better
 - Sketching design ideas
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If you're getting ready to plant a lawn, you soon may be making some important choices in terms of selecting grasses that are well adapted to your climate and how you plant and care for them. This book helps you make those choices, but first you have to answer the question, "What do I want my lawn to do for me and my landscape?"

Covering the ground from fence to fence or from one property line to another may be all you want from a lawn. If so, you probably have too much time on your hands or a sit-down tractor to mow with. You should at least consider some design alternatives that can save you time, money, and valuable resources, such as water, and make your yard look better while being more useful.

This chapter can help you design a lawn that meets the needs of you and your family.

What Is a Lawn?

A lawn is a crowded city of grasses. Not just any grasses, but ones that can grow closely together to form a nice, even carpet of green. Not just an even carpet of green, but a resilient, soft surface that can stand up to people walking or playing on it.

Unbelievable lawn factoids

A lawn is a dynamic place, filled with stolons, microorganisms, tillers, deep roots, shallow roots, rhizomes, wide leaves, thin leaves, and more. Just to show you how incredible the lawn environment is, we got on our hands and knees and started counting. We crawled over every inch of a healthy, 10,000-square foot lawn and took it apart piece by piece.

Above ground, we found

- ✓ Six grass plants per square inch
- ✓ 850 plants per square foot (we told you it was crowded)

- ✓ 8.5 million total grass plants!

Below ground, we found

- ✓ 387 miles of root per grass plant
- ✓ 329,000 miles of root per square foot
- ✓ 3 billion miles of total root!

Whew, was that a lot of work! Well, not really — we actually got that information from the Turf Resource Center. (You can find out about those hard-working guys in Appendix B.)

Actually, a lawn is an unusual situation. Few plants other than grasses can grow so close together and create what you want for a lawn. Even grasses require intense care in order to become a primo lawn. You need to mow, water, and fertilize, at the very least.

Not everyone's definition or interpretation of a lawn is the same. To some people, a lawn has to be perfect — neatly manicured, no weeds, no dead spots, no bugs, your basic country-club golf-course look.

To others, all a lawn has to be is green — or sort of green. A few weeds, no problem. A little rough around the edges, no problem. (Hey, it still beats the heck out of a dirt patch.) Actually, with less leisure time to work on a lawn and more concern about the resources the perfect lawn needs, an imperfect lawn may be the look of the future.

What lawns do for you

Using grass as a ground cover, or what we call a lawn, dates back centuries. I mean, for Pete's sake, grass is mentioned in the Bible. It's said to have been used in Chinese gardens before the birth of Christ, and you can even find mention of lawn games in the days of Sir Francis Drake. Lawns wouldn't have stuck if they weren't so beautiful and so useful. Think about why lawns are useful:

✓ **Lawns are the ideal ground cover.** A garden or yard has a floor just like your house does. Instead of using carpet to cover the floor, you use different plants, paving, decks, and mulches to cover the ground. If you don't think a grass lawn is the ideal ground cover, take your shoes off and walk across a planting of junipers or a stone mulch. Try lying down and catching some rays on your cement patio or asphalt driveway. Sure, these other garden floors have their places, but when you need a lawn, there are few suitable substitutes.

✓ **Lawns are the perfect play surface.** What do football, baseball, soccer, tennis, and many other outdoor sports have in common? That's right, they all have a grass playing surface — and for good reason. Grass is the perfect play surface — it's soft and forgiving, yet tough and durable. Believe us, you'd even be playing basketball on grass if someone could find a way to get a ball to bounce on it.

You don't even have to have an organized team to make use of grass as a play surface. If you have kids, you need a lawn. Even if it's only a small lawn, you need one. Otherwise, kids are going to be in the street, in the dirt, or — worse yet! — inside with you. (For ideas on lawn games to play with your kids, see Chapter 23.)

✓ **Lawns soothe harsh environments.** Like all plants, grass improves the environment you live in. A grass lawn absorbs carbon dioxide from the air and gives back fresh oxygen. A lawn traps dust, dirt, and pollution and prevents erosion. A well-maintained lawn also cools the air around homes and gardens, reducing the need for air conditioners.

✓ **Lawns are just plain beautiful.** One saying has stuck with us for years: "Everything looks better with a well-kept lawn." The phrase is memorable because it's so true. A lawn ties your house and landscape together and makes all the other plants look better. A beautiful lawn makes the house look better. Lawns provide order, texture, color, and character to a yard — and everything around them looks better, even you.



What lawns aren't

Although many people sing the praises of lawns, others look at lawns in a different light. Lawns that are maintained to perfection are significant consumers of limited resources including fertilizers, pesticides, and (in dry regions) water. Lawns will always have their place — you simply can't find a better outdoor playing surface. But we need to be practical about lawns. Where rainfall is normally less than a lawn needs, a big lawn may not make sense. Likewise, it may not make sense to maintain every lawn to the highest standards.



Following are some reasons why you should think carefully about planting a lawn, how much of a lawn you plant, where you plant it, and how you care for it:

- ✓ **Lawns take time and energy to care for.** You need to mow, water, fertilize, and more. Even for a small lawn, you need to spend time watering, fertilizing, mowing, and so on. Do you have time to care for what will be the most labor-intensive part of your yard?
- ✓ **Lawns use valuable resources.** In areas where droughts and water shortages are common, a lawn may use too much water. Face it, you have more important things to do with water than put it on a lawn. (See Chapter 19 for lawn alternative ideas.)
- ✓ **Lawn chemicals must be used carefully.** Most of the time, pollution occurs because of improper use of materials. Misapplied fertilizers and pesticides can end up in rivers, lakes, groundwater, and other places they're not supposed to be.

Throughout this book, you can find ways to minimize the downsides of having a lawn, make lawn care easier, conserve valuable resources, and avoid pollution. You also discover the situations when planting a lawn is not the right decision and the great alternatives you can use (see Chapter 19). For now, put aside the depressing stuff. We love grass, from roots to blades!



If you don't plant grass, what can you do?

If you decide that a lawn isn't a great idea for your part of the country or neighborhood, then you do have alternatives.

Consider using other plants besides grass. You can create a border around the outside of your yard and plant it with trees, shrubs, flowering perennials, or other blooming plants. A border may cost you a little more to get started, but you make it up in saved time and energy in the long run. And your yard will be so much more beautiful. If you don't believe us, look at some of the photographs in the color section of this book.

You also can use some of the lawn alternatives we describe in Chapter 19. A nice deck or patio, although expensive, makes a yard so much more livable. How about putting in a little playground for the kids? You can cover the soil underneath with a nice layer of soft organic material such as shredded bark.

There is a huge, wonderful world of lawn alternatives.

Lawn Decisions



Designing a lawn involves more than making decisions about what will look best. You also need to make practical decisions that influence how easy it is to care for. You have to decide about cost, how you will water the lawn, and even who will care for it. Here are some things you want to think about as you design your lawn:

- ✓ **Cost:** Compared to many other landscape features, like patios, decks, and walkways, a lawn is relatively inexpensive. However, the bigger a lawn, the more it costs to install. Different methods of planting also affect cost. It generally costs less to plant a lawn from seed than from sod. But sod, on the other hand, gives you instant results and reduces some of the chances of failures common with growing lawn from seed.
- ✓ **Climate:** You need to think about which grass is best for your area and the type of care it'll need. In dry summer areas, like parts of the southwestern United States, lawns need weekly watering. A permanent, below-ground irrigation system with an automatic timer adds costs to lawn installation, but it saves you a lot of time compared to watering with a hose-end sprinkler.
- ✓ **Maintenance time and expense:** Who will mow, water, and fertilize your lawn? Again, the bigger the lawn, the more time and money it takes to care for it. You can hire a lawn maintenance company to do almost everything, but that costs more than caring for it yourself.

The following sections describe other important decisions you need to make before designing your lawn.

How large a lawn do you really need?

One of the best ways to reduce the time it takes to care for a lawn and the amount of resources it uses is to reduce its size. Brilliant deduction, huh?

Out in the dry-summer, western United States, water conservation is always a top priority (and that really should be the case everywhere). After all, water can be limited, there are always too many people, and a drought can be right around the corner.

One way to conserve water is to really think about how much lawn you need and then plant only that much. By reducing the size of lawns (which consume a huge percentage of urban water in the West), you save water. In addition, smaller lawns naturally take less time to care for.

By looking carefully at how people use lawns, water agencies in the West determine that many people only need about 600 to 800 square feet of grass. (See the color section for ideas on designing small lawns.) Unless you have a lot of friends who like to come over and play rugby, 600 to 800 square feet is enough for a small play area or for just lounging around — it's about the size of a large patio. Now, if you want to play volleyball, badminton, or croquet, you need a little more lawn. A rectangle measuring 45 × 80 feet (3,600 square feet) is plenty. In fact, in areas where summer rainfall is common, an average lawn is generally about 7,000 to 10,000 square feet.

Is your lawn shipshape?

A lawn doesn't have to be square. Circular lawns, kidney-shaped lawns, and undulating swathes of lawn are more visually interesting than a plain square or rectangle. An irregularly shaped lawn also softens the effects of a square yard surrounded by a tall fence. Be creative!



As you design the shape of your lawn, be careful. If you get too wild with the shape of your lawn, you can make it very hard to mow and water properly. Do sprinklers come in models that spray in the pattern of a double helix? Don't think so.

Where are you going to put your lawn?

The backyard seems like a natural spot to put your lawn because that's where the kids can play safely and where you can relax. A backyard also offers refuge from street noise and neighbors.

You also may want a lawn in the front yard. A front lawn certainly makes the face of the house more pleasing and inviting. And besides, how are the neighbors going to know how well you care for your lawn if it's not out in the front of the house where they can see it?

If the only time you use the front lawn is when you walk on it while mowing, maybe a ground cover or other low-maintenance plant is a better idea — at least you'd have a lot less work. See Chapter 19 for some ideas.

How about a lawn along the side of the house where no one goes? Get real. Get creative.

How do you want the lawn to affect the overall look of your yard?

Perhaps a wide open patch of lawn extending from here to way out yonder is your idea of the most beautiful landscape in the world. More power to you. Just don't ask us to help plant it or to borrow our lawn mower.

Lawns are beautiful to look at, no doubt about that. But like most parts of a landscape, lawns are even more beautiful when combined with other plants and landscape features. That old saying keeps coming back: "Everything looks better with a well-kept lawn." It's true.

What's in a name?

To make sure that we all know which plants we're talking about, plant lovers have a system of plant naming based on Latin and Greek. Common names have a problem. What you may know as a forget-me-not may really be one of two different plants: Chinese forget-me-not (*Cynoglossum amabile*) or common forget-me-not (*myosotis sylvatica*). The plants look similar, but actually come from different families.

Every plant is a member of a larger botanical family, sharing general characteristics with other members. For most lawn grasses, that family name is *Poaceae*.

Plant families are divided into groups of closer relatives, indicated by a group, or genus. The genus name appears in italics with the first letter capitalized. Lawn grasses include plants from many genera, including *Agrostis*, *Festuca*, *Poa*, and *Zoysia*.

The next name identifies the species within the genus. Like the genus, the species name also appears in italics, but the first letter is lowercase. The name for tall fescue is *Festuca arundinacea*.

Sometimes you see a third name, which identifies varieties. Selected from a species, varieties are individual plants that have some

unique feature that makes them slightly different from the species. For example, 'Bonsai' is a dwarf variety of tall fescue. Don't ask us why varieties are put in single quotes and not italicized. All you need to know is that they are.

The cool thing about all this Latin/Greek mumbo jumbo is that it's not mumbo jumbo to plant lovers, no matter where you go in the world. The word *subway* in the United States is *tube* in England and *le metro* in France. But *Festuca arundinacea* in the United States is *Festuca arundinacea* in England and France and anywhere else you may go.

You come across one other distinction between grasses over and over again in this book: the difference between cool-season grasses and warm-season grasses. You can discover a lot about each type in Chapters 2 and 3. In a nutshell, these grasses are what they sound like. Cool-season grasses grow best in the cool months of fall and spring, and are most widely grown where winters are cold. Warm-season grasses are almost the mirror opposite. They grow best in the heat of summer and can't live through very cold winters. The distinction is very important, because the type of grass you choose influences almost every aspect of its planting and care.

The soft formality of a lawn is the perfect accent to the rougher textures of other plants. A lawn makes trees, shrubs, and especially flowers look cleaner and more tailored than if they were surrounded by just dirt. Some of the most ordinary plants become extraordinary when grass is in the foreground. But more important, a well-designed lawn adds order to a landscape. A lawn's position and shape says this garden was planned and well-thought out. That impression is what usually turns good landscapes into wonderful landscapes.

A lawn also visually opens up areas, allowing you to look out and enjoy the vista of the rest of the yard or further. A nice lawn beckons you into the garden with an invitation that says, "Come out here, enjoy this."

So when you design your lawn, think about more than just utility — use lawns to make your whole yard and home look better. You can find many ideas on how to create this vision by looking at the photographs in the color section.

Putting Pencil to Paper

Now that you've considered how much lawn you need, where you want to put it, what shapes you may use, and how it can affect the overall look of your yard, you need to put some ideas down on paper. We can't give you a complete lesson in landscaping, but sometimes simply putting some rough shapes on paper can really help you visualize what your lawn may look like. A drawing also can help you avoid some problems.

Take a piece of graph paper and rough out a sketch of the house and yard, trying to keep it to scale (1 inch to 10 or 20 feet usually works). You probably have to get out a tape measure and make a few measurements to get the dimensions right.



Now add some lawn blobs — rough shapes of where the grass may go. This sketch helps you visualize actual sizes and relationships of different areas and landscape features. You may even want to use some string or flour (that's right, baking flour — just line it out) to outline different areas. You also can use lime (in the east) or gypsum to mark boundaries. Either is cheaper than flour.

Even though a lawn can take people walking on it, you don't want to put grass where you get a lot of foot traffic. The grass just wears out, if you do. Stepping-stones or paved walkways usually are better solutions. However, grass paths winding through a seldom-used area of the garden are elegant.

Consider what you see as you look out over your future lawn. Imagine the view not only from the house, but from the yard to the house and from the street to the house. What can you do make the view better?

Think about how people get to the lawn. Putting the lawn right next to a patio makes easy access for kids and adults. On the other hand, a paved path leading to a small secluded lawn may be just the getaway spot you need to find some solitude.

Don't forget that a lawn has a cooling affect on nearby areas. The moisture evaporating through the grass leaves can dramatically drop temperatures during hot weather — perfect for outside windows or doorways or next to patios.

See how much fun this is?

Designing a Low-Maintenance Lawn



Besides making your lawn smaller, you also can incorporate some of the following design techniques to make your lawn easier to care for:

- ✔ **Put in mowing strips.** These strips are usually several inches wide and encircle all or part of your lawn. Usually made of cement or wood, they allow you to run the wheels of your lawn mower right up to the edge of the grass so that you don't have to come back and trim by hand later. Mowing strips also can prevent aggressive lawn grasses like Bermuda grass from growing out of bounds and becoming weeds in nearby planting areas. (Chapter 5 has instructions on how to make mowing strips.)
- ✔ **Use edgings.** Edgings are usually thinner and often less permanent than mowing strips. They are also less expensive and easier to install. Even though you can't run your mower wheels on top of them, edgings can help keep grasses in bounds and give your lawn a nice clean edge. They also can make the lawn easier to trim.
- ✔ **Don't plant lawns in narrow or awkwardly shaped areas.** Narrow strips of grass like you usually see between street and sidewalks are hard to mow and almost impossible to water properly. Who needs the hassle? Go with a ground cover or other lawn alternative (see Chapter 19) — that is, if your city or homeowners association lets you. Some cities and associations require grass in these narrow strips. Better check first.
- ✔ **Don't plant lawns on steep slopes.** Grass growing on a steep incline is dangerous to mow. If the mower flips over, you could turn into a very messy mulch. Slopes are also hard to water; the water quickly runs into the gutter before the soil can absorb any of it.
- ✔ **Don't plant lawns in heavily shaded areas.** Some grasses can grow in light shade, but the less light a lawn gets, the more trouble it has and the worse it looks. Besides, if trees cause the shade, the tree roots battle with the lawn for water and nutrients. And the trees almost always win.



Now you've not only designed a beautiful lawn, you've done it smartly, too.

