

Best Ways to get a Great Yard!

What's the number one choice for landscaping your yard? Hands down it's grass, and although it seems so easy to grow, we sometimes discover that it needs a couple of things to survive and look good: light and water. Most grasses need at least 4 to 5 hours of sunlight a day to survive, though different species have different light requirements. If your yard is sunny for at least 6-8 hours per day you can get away with common Bermuda grass but if your yard is primarily shaded and the best you can do is 3-4 hours you will need to look elsewhere. Many stores advertise and sell a variety of grasses such as Kentucky Blue Grass, Fescue or Rye; these grasses grow well in our fall and winter months, but cannot stand up to Texas summers; plus you'll be mowing during the winter! Instead look for grasses developed for this environment, Zoysia and St. Augustine are probably the most common and available choices. Zoysia grass is hardy in USDA plant hardiness zones 6 through 9, and grows in full sun or part shade. St. Augustine grass is hardy in zones 8 through 10 and has excellent shade tolerance.

If grasses do not get enough light, growth will slow and the leaves will become thin and long. To help established lawns survive in shady conditions, mow the grass about one-half inch to an inch higher than usual and prune the lower limbs of shade trees, fall and winter is the best time to do this. When installing sod, make sure to till the ground/soil/old grass so that the new sod will take hold and grow and thrive. Pre-water the yard and maybe add a starter fertilizer before laying down the sod and water thoroughly after installing, and follow the recommended watering schedule. If you have access to a lawn roller, roll the sod to help it bond to the ground and become established sooner. Final point here, don't wait until late in the season, get your grass down before the end of September, that way it has a chance of becoming established and surviving through the winter.

Oh, one more vital point... put down the weed and feed fertilizer. Seriously, most of us have hybrid lawns, a combination of narrow blade and wide blade grass; these combination fertilizer/weed removers are designed to get rid of one type of grass or the other (narrow blade or wide blade), and more often than not they leave the yard looking rather sparse or may even kill your lawn completely if you pick the wrong one. The best solution for most weeds is a regular mowing schedule. You can give yourself a little head start by using a pre-emergent such as Betasan. A pre-emergent controls weed seeds that have yet to sprout. For warm season weeds, apply in mid to late February. For winter weed control, apply in mid to late September. A couple applications set 2-3 weeks apart is most successful. For stubborn weeds such as Johnson Grass, Sedge or Nut-Grass, you will need an herbicide. Herbicides are very powerful so they should be used sparingly and locally, i.e. only directly on the offending weed. These particular weeds spread by rhizomes deep in the ground, so multiple applications applied at regular intervals will be required. If you dislike chemical herbicides you can make your own lethal weed remover by mixing white vinegar with salt, check on-line for the recipe and measurements of each ingredient.

If you have shade all day, you may want to consult an arborist and maybe remove several branches to thin the canopy or even remove a tree to allow light to get through. Note, this a job best left to professionals, branches and trees are far larger and heavier than they appear from the ground and can do a lot of damage. Also, removal may require PGNA approval (See Community-wide Bulletin B1.21 Trees, Stumps, and Tree Rings)

Some of you may prefer shade, if so you will have to look to something other than grass. There are several options available, with my favorite being Dwarf Mondo Grass. It thrives in shade and only grows to 3 inches high so – NO MOWING! Regular Mondo grass grows a bit taller and may need to be trimmed every so often to keep it looking neat. The same is true for many of the other ground covers which thrive in shade such as Asian jasmine and winter creeper. Consult a plant store that specializes in plants exclusively and not a big box store that treats landscaping as a sideline; plant stores have professionals that know what grows best in your particular situation and can guide you to the best alternatives. Another important thing to consider, the taller your ground cover, the greater the chance of attracting mice, and mice attract snakes. Mowing your ground cover 2-3 times per year with your mower set at the highest setting will keep it looking neat and tidy and avoid the pests that may want to make it home.

For yards with heavy shade, consider increasing the size of plant and flower beds. Shrubs are more tolerant of shade, provided they are allowed to grow to their optimal mature size. A Red-tip Photinia may look great at the nursery and priced well within budget but its mature size is between 15 and 30 feet tall, depending on variety, with an equal amount of spread, if you place it under trees and struggle to keep it pruned down to 3-4 feet, as I've seen all too often, you'll have a sickly plant that will not beautify your yard.

Learn to read the labels and pick a plant that is USDA zone compatible (we live in a 7b or 8a depending if the plant is exposed or protected from winter cold and winds), has a mature size that fits the area you wish to fill and has light and water requirements that match your yard environment. Putting the right plant in the right place will improve its chance of survival, greatly reduce your workload and look good for many years to come with very little effort.

If you plan on expanding your shrub and flower bed, again remember the mature size of the plants and always place the tallest plants in the back of the shrub bed, think stairs. As you move forward in the bed, look for plants that are not only smaller but that contrast with the plants behind them. This way they will stand out better and give you a more attractive look. Contrast can take the form of plant color, leaf size or shape and texture. Think of it like you would getting dressed, only now you are dressing your yard and you want it to POP instead of blending all together into a green blob.

Good soil preparation may seem tedious but trust me doing it right from the start will actually save you countless hours of labor in the future and save on water. Like they used to say in the commercial "You can pay me now, or you can pay me later". This is especially true for landscaping your yard; good preparation will pay dividends by reducing your need to water and weed your plant and flower beds. And that brings up another very important point, edging.

Without a good edge between your plant & flower bed and your lawn, grass WILL work its way into it, and depending on how long it is allowed to do so, could become a nightmare to correct. Most edging material sold is not designed for our grasses; Bermuda, Zoysia and St. Augustine will all run over, under or across most edging. A solid edging which is both deep and wide, such as concrete pavers, brick, etc., are about the only type that will stand up to the test of time.

So how do you get edging which will not break the landscape budget you may ask... well depending on your choice of edging your options may vary a bit but mostly will require constant vigilance. I've been very successful with trench edging which just as its name implies is nothing more than a 6 inch wide-6 inch deep trench. The cost is right and the method requires that you

run your string trimmer along it whenever you do your regular lawn mowing. Keep the trench clear of vegetation and it will keep the grass from crossing over. Keeping the edging clear of vegetation works well with metal or plastic edging too, but requires more attention to detail but a semi-annual close in spraying with an herbicide to discourage any plant growth along the edge margin can reduce the level of detail necessary.

If grass does manage to meander into your shrub and flower bed, bite the bullet and dig it out or apply a localized herbicide on it as soon as possible. If you prepared your soil well, the roots should be easy to pull. Once clean again, a heavy application of mulch, 2-4 inches, will also reduce your workload, but be careful not to smother your shrubs, leave a couple inches around the base so that moisture doesn't weaken the plant stem and invite disease or insects. In my experience, shredded Cypress or Cedar mulch work best, they help prevent bugs and are far less susceptible to washing away with a heavy rain.

Finally, the icing on the cake - FLOWERS! Everyone likes flowers but may not like the work to plant them every season or every year. No problem, if you have a good mix of shrubs with high contrast you may not need them, in fact some shrubs may even give you all the flowers your heart desires. Others may want more flowers, for you - perennials are your best option, provided they were meant for this zone and the light/shade environment of your yard. Although more expensive initially, they will only improve over the years and perennials typically require less water, so you could say they pay for themselves over time. You may even get so many you'll want to divide them and give some away, which by the way is how most people get started with perennials. Trading plants with your neighbors helps everyone. Call it a WIN-WIN, the price is right and the neighborhood starts looking better and better, which makes it a nicer place to live, and that increases home values (SMILE). BONUS, you get to meet and know your neighbors, never met a gardener who wasn't a nice person.

Not all flowers are perennials, Annuals bring a big splash of color to your landscape. These flowers need to be replanted every year, though because of our relatively temperate climate I have had numerous annuals act like perennials and re-bloom for several years before dying. Annuals typically have bigger brighter flowers, bloom profusely and typically live from spring to fall, but some are seasonal, i.e. petunias work well in the spring and chrysanthemums love the fall. Some annuals reseed themselves and provided you gave them a good home will come back year after year. I bet if you had periwinkles or purple hearts last year, you'll have them again next year and the next and....

A few Annuals added to a well-planned landscape will be like putting a bow on a gift or a candle on a cake, make it special. To save money and get a lot more flowers, you can buy starter packs early or start these from seed, again early. An easy way to do that is get some potting soil and use one of the disposable containers, the ones with the clear lids, that you get with takeout food, and who hasn't done that this year. These create a small greenhouse for you to start your plant seeds, when they reach the lid, transplant them to either larger containers for additional growth or plant them in your yard. YouTube has hundreds of videos showing how to do this.

So... what are you waiting for? It's time to start planning that welcoming landscape you enjoy coming home to, or if you are working from home, a better place to work.