

Lawn Lovers Versus Flower Fanciers

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September is the month for the most important renovation tasks for cool-season lawns. During this month, we should be controlling weeds, dethatching, aerating, overseeding, and fertilizing. If we do everything right, we should have a beautiful green carpet that is attractive and provides a safe play area for children.

But large manicured lawns are desert wastelands for wildlife. There is no nectar or pollen for bees, butterflies, and other insects; no seed or fruit plants for birds; no food for bunnies or deer. Plus, as I showed above, lawns can be high-maintenance, and require large inputs of chemicals and gasoline.

A growing number of gardeners are taking out sections of their lawns and replacing them with wildflowers, rain gardens, and ornamental and edible plants. When planned and planted correctly, and properly maintained, these gardens can be attractive, and provide needed food for pollinators and wildlife.

However, a significant challenge that sometimes arises are angry neighbors. Some people really, really love their lawns. They're out there every day, faithfully mowing, raking, edging, and watering their grass. I've seen people cut down trees so they can grow grass. It's a source of pride with them. But it edges over into obsession when they begin objecting to neighbors not following in their grassy footsteps, and making anonymous complaints to local government offices.

All around the country, including here in Evansville, homeowners have been cited and ticketed for not having a green turfgrass lawn in their front yard. For years, I've had to explain to local weed control boards and code enforcement offices that no, this is not an unkempt and abandoned yard, but is in fact a perennial flower bed, or a wildflower garden. Just this past month, a homeowner was cited for having a property "overgrown with weeds or noxious plants." Before she could respond, the highway department mowed her yard with what looked like a highway excavator, removing not only the plants but the topsoil as well.

If you plan on replacing your front lawn with flowers, landscaping, or even a garden, it's important to communicate with your neighbors. Inform them that you are not ignoring your yard, but are instead transforming it, and that there will be a period of transition where it's not going to look like the meadows in the catalogs. Put a small ornamental fence around the areas being converted, so that it looks more like a flower bed. Even

some cute signage (“Please excuse my mud, wildflower garden in production”) can help alert neighbors and government inspectors that something wonderful is in the making.

Of course, you need to be a good neighbor, too, by preventing weeds from invading. This may mean using herbicides, as well as mulch and hand-pulling. It’s hard for me to defend a flower garden that is full of Johnsongrass, ragweed, and tree-of-heaven seedlings.

The Tri-State Interfaith Creation Care alliance will be hosting a program on “The Plight of our Pollinators: Saving Our Bees and Butterflies” on Monday, September 19, at 6:30 p.m., at Evansville’s Central Library on Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. The presentation will be by Mark Cambron of the Vanderburgh County Soil and Water Conservation District. I hope you can attend this free event.

For more information on lawns or landscapes, contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.