

Replacing the Green Desert: *Meadowscaping and Other Native Alternatives*

The great American love affair with lawns has a long tradition. The funny thing is, it's not even our tradition - we adopted the idea from Europe where turf grasses are native. And that's where the ecological problem starts. Our native flora and fauna species did not co-evolve with European turf grasses and are not supported by these exotic grass species.

Turf demonstrates its incompatibility with our local ecosystems by demanding enormous amounts of inputs in order to grow well – copious amounts of water, fertilizer and labor. Turf is like a demanding child – always hungry, always needy, and incapable of being left alone. The average American lawn uses 20,000 gallons of water per year for irrigation and homeowners use ten times more synthetic pesticides on their lawns than farmers use on crops.

Exotic grass lawns are virtual wastelands in our local ecosystems. This was not such a huge problem when America had great expanses of “natural” areas and homeowners allowed parts of their landscapes to grow “naturally,” before intrusive invasive exotic species became so common. Now, many of our native species are seriously threatened and biodiversity is at an all time low in our landscapes.

Why does biodiversity matter so much? Research has shown that biodiverse landscapes are more resilient over time to pests, diseases and climate change - the trifecta of environmental threats that seems to be growing daily. Still not convinced? Consider the fact that biodiversity is the key to healthy ecosystems, and healthy ecosystems deliver “ecosystem services” that we humans rely upon. Purification of air and water, carbon sequestration, crop pollination, climate regulation, soil fertility, waste detoxification, prevention or moderation of flooding – these are just some of the ecosystem services that we cannot exist without. Lawns just don't deliver.

Landscape professionals can help homeowners and commercial clients “connect the ecological dots” and convert turf into biodiverse landscapes filled with life. It's good for humans and good for the ecosystems of which we are a part. Consider the difference between a lifeless monoculture of turf that supports almost no species vs. a meadowscape (a true meadow or meadow-like garden) filled with a diversity of native plants, attracting a wide array of songbirds, butterflies, pollinating insects and so on. Make this ecologically-rich, new landscape welcoming to clients by mowing a wide path in the middle, so they can take a stroll and enjoy the show. Or, they could stare at lifeless turf!

The functional aspect of meadows and native plant alternatives is also compelling. Shallow-rooted turf is no match for the deep roots of many native plants that excel at keeping stormwater in place, enriching the soil as they grow in a complex matrix underground. Many of our native plants are workhorses at sequestering carbon and trapping or remediating toxins in the soil. Exotic turf? Not even close.

Perhaps your client is not ready to remove an entire lawn. In that case, start with a smaller area and plant it with a compelling array of native plants, showcasing a beautiful succession of bloom from early spring through late fall. Make sure to site the meadowscape or native planting in a central location where the birds, butterflies and pollinating insects are in full view of your client.

Transitioning clients from turf to meadowscapes and other native alternatives means transitioning your business, as well. Many clients are now seeking out landscape professionals who offer more environmentally-friendly services including: organic maintenance, compost and compost tea applications, invasive plant removal, native landscapes, meadow installations, and so on. Are you ready? Differentiate your business now and outcompete the competition. It works and it pays!



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Kim Eierman will be speaking at **New England Grows** in Boston on **Wednesday, February 5, 2014** at 2:00 p.m. Her topic is, *Replacing the Green Desert: Meadowscaping & Native Plant Alternatives*.

To learn more about Kim and EcoBeneficial!, visit www.EcoBeneficial.com.