

# You don't need a pesky lawn

BY DEREK LIPPERT

With a sense of urgency brought on by the pesticide ban debate, Guelph will likely see more residents and local policy makers questioning not only the right to add chemicals to our lawns, but also the need for its very existence. You see, increased anxiety over pesticide and fertilizer usage is but one area of concern related to turf.

In addition to relying on chemical inputs, lawns place demands on numerous shared resources. The need for watering is of chief concern, especially in a groundwater-dependent region such as ours.

Air quality and noise pollution are also concerns. Emissions from lawnmowers, trimmers, and gas blowers add significantly to smog levels; and everyone knows the aggravating noises they make.

Of course you don't have to add water and chemicals to your lawn; in which case it certainly won't stay green, or grow very much for that matter. But then, if it didn't grow, you at least wouldn't have to spend your Saturdays cutting it. Maybe it's a backlash against this unending labour, rather than the health and environmental issues, which is causing more and more people to look for alternatives.

So, what are the alternatives to a traditional lawn? A drive around town will reveal many variations on the concept, some excellent and some not so appealing. The trend has been called 'naturescaping', 'natural landscaping', and 'xeriscaping'.

These terms can be confusing and a bit misleading. 'Naturescaping' and 'natural landscaping' give the impression of something very wild or unkempt in your front yard, which need not be the case.

'Xeriscaping' is a Greek term relating to dry land gardening, and encompasses the principle of drought tolerance. However, the best way to describe this trend may simply be 'turf-free landscaping' or 'lawn alternatives'. Whatever it's called, the fundamentals of drought tolerance and pest resistance are key to its success.

With a great variety of ground covers, shrubs, and perennials available, turf-free landscapes can be designed to fit most peoples' needs, lifestyles, and budgets. With some creativity, anything from a low, conservative appear-



Derek Lippert, centre, rests with Naturally Maintained employees Mike Lippert, left, and Jason Gibbons at the edge of a turf-free landscape they created this spring in Kitchener. Concerns about chemical pesticide use, lawnmower emissions and hard labour have inspired many homeowners to look for alternatives to grassy lawns.

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ance to a season long riot of colour can be arranged.

For those interested in ecology, or attracting birds, butterflies, and insects, landscape designs can include a wide variety of plants native to southern Ontario.

Despite many benefits, the initial cost of a lawn alternative can be a major set-back.

Unless you grow your own, or have many friends that garden, plants can be very expensive. Looking for 'end of season' sales is the best bet here. Some form of mulch is required for weed suppression and water retention, and can be costly depending on the square footage being covered. As long as a

good plan is developed initially, your yard can be converted piece by piece, spreading out costs over a number of years.

Another fear comes from the question of maintenance. Whereas lawn care is ingrained in our collective consciousness, the thought of 'gardening' can be a major turn off to many. However, if the concepts of drought tolerance and pest resistance are followed during plant selection, lawn alternatives become rather care-free over time.

Weeding and watering are important throughout the first year or two, until the plants get established. As time goes on, and open spaces fill in,

watering becomes almost unnecessary and weeding minimal, depending on personal tolerance.

Grass will always have its place, but there are also places where it doesn't need to be.

The trend towards lawn alternatives will continue to grow. If not for aesthetic reasons alone, issues such as pesticide by-laws, watering restrictions, and noise complaints will gradually push more and more citizens away from turf.

• Derek Lippert owns Naturally Maintained, a Kitchener-based drought-tolerant and pest-resistant lawn alternative company.