



A Cape Cod Lawn

If you have lived on the Cape long enough, you probably know what a Cape Cod lawn is. Some older properties still retain these mosaics of moss and a variety of native species that may include sedges, violets, wintergreen, low bush blueberry, bearberry, and native little bluestem grass. This is what a Cape Cod lawn is composed of—whatever will grow in the poor sandy soils of our region. Often there are mosses of different kinds, and sometimes what grows has flowers, like blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium montanum*).

A Cape Cod lawn is an open area that is not irrigated, fertilized, or otherwise treated with chemicals. It is diverse with species, undulating with height of plants, a natural area, except for maybe occasional mowing as necessary to maintain walkways during the growing season. It goes dormant in the heat of the summer, and many a true Cape Coddler brags about the last mow at the end of June and not having to touch the mower until the fall!

The traditional turf lawn of suburbia demands water and lawn chemicals—and mowing. Our Cape summers are dry, and even hotter and drier in recent years with watering bans in almost all Cape communities. Our waterways are overburdened with nutrients, some of which come from fertilizers and stormwater runoff. **The truth is, the suburban turf lawn just doesn't belong on Cape Cod.**

Granted, giving up lush turf lawn that's green all year-round means a social change for some. But change can happen. We already have an acceptable alternative, and it's the Cape Cod lawn. It requires a more relaxed view of our yardscape and turning away from the hyper-pressure to have golf course perfection that essentially grew out of successful marketing by the lawn industry for over 75 years. As the author of *A New Garden Ethic*, Benjamin Vogt, says, "we just have to 'rethink pretty'."

Changing a social norm is possible. Remember when we made the healthy move to ban smoking from public spaces? Some thought it was an impossible change, but it happened, and we are all better for it. So too, we can move from fertilized lawns to a good old Cape Cod lawn.

If you already have a Cape Cod lawn, know that your yard demonstrates your stewardship of the Cape's natural resources and shows that you care about the Cape's water and a healthy environment.

How do you transition to a Cape Cod lawn?

- Simply stop lawn treatments, including fertilizing and spreading lime (often done to try to change the pH—a futile effort in the long term). Stop irrigating. Water conservation is always a good practice.
- Reduce your mowing frequency. It will benefit pollinators and other valuable insect life.
- If you can't go cold turkey (or your roommate can't)—you can top-dress with compost and overseed bare areas in late spring or early fall with Dutch white clover and drought-tolerant fescue grass seed available at your local nursery.
- Allow moss to flourish. (It doesn't need mowing!)
- Control invasive species. Know the non-native invaders on your site so that you'll know the appropriate action to keep them at bay. For example, if you have bittersweet on your property, you will want to pull any young seedlings that appear.
- Leaving some little bare sandy spaces is okay! It may be the perfect habitat for one of our many solitary native bees to nest, such as the squash bee that pollinates your zucchini.
- Plant trees for shade—this will help your Cape Cod lawn stay greener longer. You'd be surprised what a few hours of shade will do.
- While many native plants will show up on their own because they are deposited by the wind, or birds, or existing in the seed bank in the soil, you can actively diversify your lawn with native species by supplementing with native sedges or wild strawberry and other low-growing native species appropriate for the site.

You have permission to have a Cape Cod lawn because, after all, you live on Cape Cod, and aren't there better ways to spend your time and money?



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