

# A More Natural Approach to Landscaping: An Alternative to the Traditional Lawn 2007

Last week I was gazing through the window and watched a jogger come to a complete halt in front of our house. He stood there for several minutes staring into our woodland garden which takes up a third of our front yard and is shaded by a huge live oak. I suppose he was taken with the showy white blossoms of the five wild indigos along with the hundreds of dainty red columbine flowers. Or maybe it was the cool lavender woodland phlox that caught his attention. I didn't go out and ask him.

It's hard to believe that when we first moved in 15 years ago, there was nothing here but lawn beneath the resurrection fern laden limbs of this grand old tree. The lawn wasn't faring very well because it was growing in too much shade. An evergreen groundcover/wildflower called partridgeberry had already begun to reestablish itself in the weak lawn. We removed the existing grass and mulched the area. Over the years we have planted a cabbage palm, needle palm and blue-stem palmetto beneath the canopy of the live oak and a red-buckeye tree at the edge. We planted the upper part of the garden with woods fern, which is spreading nicely. The partridgeberry is spreading throughout as is the columbine; we planted just four or five plants originally.

This is a fairly low maintenance part of our yard. My husband and I weed it periodically, certainly not regularly. In March and April, we let the live oak leaves stay where they fall, providing natural mulch and fertilizer for the garden. It needs much less water than other parts of our yard.

Another option in heavily shaded areas is a solid planting of liriopse or mondo grass; both are easy to establish and make a bold statement when used in a sweeping mass. But I much prefer the less formal look of the woodland garden, the comings and goings of different plants with the seasons – first the trillium,

woodland phlox and bloodroot followed by Jack-in-the-Pulpit, green dragon, wild indigo and columbine and later the bright red Indian pinks.

More maintenance is required when you do away with your lawn in sunny areas. Give a weed seed exposed soil and sun and it will take the opportunity to flourish. Knowing this, we still opted to get rid of another third of our lawn and turn it into a butterfly/herb/vegetable garden that is alive with bees, butterflies, birds and lots of flowers. This is a high maintenance endeavor but gardeners will find the work enjoyable and relaxing.

The final third of the front yard is a St. Augustine lawn which has served nicely over the years as a playing surface for our children with their soccer balls, footballs and slip-and-slides. We maintain the lawn by mowing regularly at 3-4 inches, watering only when the grass begins to wilt, and fertilizing with an organic fertilizer as little as possible. We never use herbicides on the lawn and instead keep weeds mowed with the rest of the lawn. I will always have a picture in my mind of our daughter relaxing on the lawn, leaning against a rock wall book in hand, guinea pig grazing to her left and dog soaking up sun on her right. Would I have wanted her lounging in the grass with a mess of chemicals lingering in the soil?

The move from lawn to a more natural yard has happened gradually for us. We are not willing to use toxic chemicals to support a showy lawn. The natural approach has worked well for us and it suits our personalities. If you are interested in this subject, read *Noah's Garden, Restoring the Ecology of our own Back Yards* by Sara Stein.

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