

Converting Lawn into Garden (Published 2024-09-07)

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There is a recent shift in the American landscape away from the manicured pristine lawn to a yard that includes raised vegetable beds, wildlife habitat gardens, xeriscaping and even pollinator meadows. Why is such a change happening across the country? It's not only environmentally friendly, but there are economic advantages also. A large swath of green lawn became popular as a status symbol in the 17th century and has carried through to modern times. People are becoming aware of environmental issues associated with lawns. They require a lot of water, chemicals and labor to keep the grass green. More and more folks have decided to embrace landscaping that lowers the cost of maintenance and supports wildlife and is just better overall for the planet.

The first step in this process is deciding how much of your lawn you want to convert to garden. Start with a small area so you can learn the process and have a greater chance of success. After you have plotted out the potential area, you will need to remove the grass turf. There are a few different methods of accomplishing this and they all have their pros and cons.

The most labor intensive is, of course, digging out the turf with a shovel. You will get instant results, but this is back-breaking labor. And there are significant disadvantages. Removing sod also removes organic materials. You'll need to add back some topsoil and compost which increases cost. Another issue with this method is what to do with the sod that is removed. You could replant the sod in other areas of your yard if you have a place for it. Otherwise, you'll need to check with waste management rules to see if you can take it to a landfill site.

If you choose this route, water the area for a few days before you dig to make the soil easier to work with, be sure the soil is only moist and not soggy. Cut the soil with an edger into 1 by 2-foot parallel strips. Pry up one edge of the strip and slide a shovel or gardening fork underneath it and lift, cutting through any roots.

If you have decided to convert a large area of your yard to garden, consider renting a sod cutter to cut back on time and expended labor. You could also prep the area by using a tiller. You would not have to add back any organic filler, but you will churn up weed seeds so be prepared to delay planting for a few weeks while you keep the dirt moist and do preventive weeding.

Solarization is a chemical-free method to kill grass and weeds using the sun's rays to heat up the soil underneath a clear plastic covering. This process traps heat and moisture which eventually kills all the vegetation under the sheet. Prepare the area for covering by mowing it as short as possible and saturate with water. Place a 2 to 6 mil clear plastic sheet over the freshly prepped lawn and secure the edge of the plastic with bricks and rocks or bury the edges with sand or soil. If tears occur, repair with clear packing tape as needed. You can tell when the grass has died off by a quick visual inspection through the clear plastic. The hotter the ambient temperature, the quicker the grass underneath will die. Technically this process can be used year-round but works fastest in the summer when the sun shines brightly. While this method is easier than removing soil or tilling, it can take weeks in the summer and months in the winter for the grass to die off.

You can also use opaque or black plastic instead of clear, this is called occultation and will achieve similar results but typically takes a few weeks longer.

A third method is sheet mulching, also known as the lasagna method. Cut the lawn area as short as possible and water as with the solarization technique. Cover the area with cardboard or thick layers of newspaper. Then cover that with about 3 to 4 inches of mulch. This method can be used any season. If done in the fall, your new garden area will be ready to plant in the spring. Cardboard can often be obtained from local retailers and sometimes from county recycle center. This is a very popular method among master gardeners.

Late summer or early fall is the perfect time to prepare new garden beds. Check with your local nursery for suggestions for your new wildlife garden or raised vegetable beds.

Resources

“Using the sun to kill weeds and prepare garden plots,”

<https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/solarization-occultation>

“Removing Your Lawn,”

<https://water.ca.gov/Water-Basics/Conservation-Tips/Removing-Your-Lawn>

“Sheet Mulching: Lawn to Garden Bed in 3 Steps,”

<https://extension.psu.edu/sheet-mulching-lawn-to-garden-bed-in-3-steps>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site:

<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

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