

ECOLAWNS REQUIRE LESS FERTILIZER, WATER AND WEED CONTROL

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How would you like to have a green lawn that required watering less than once per month and only needed mowing once every three weeks?

Tom Cook, Oregon State University's turf grass expert and associate professor of horticulture, has been working for nine years to develop a lawn like this - a carpet of green that takes a minimum of care, water, chemical weed control and fertilization. Many folks term these lawns "ecolawns."

"When we irrigate these 'ecolawn' mixes once per month in the summer, and mow every three weeks during the growing season, the lawn stays green and for the most part looks like a normal lawn," said Cook. "And so far, we have never sprayed any of the plots with pesticides."

By Cook's standards, most people, especially in western Oregon, already have "de facto" low maintenance lawns - they are low maintenance by virtue that they get little care.

"Most peoples' lawns are mowed sporadically in spring, occasionally in summer and fall and not at all in winter," said Cook. "A clear majority don't irrigate at all and of those who do few irrigate consistently."

"Perhaps 70 percent of these home lawns are never fertilized and very few are ever treated with herbicides for weed control," he added. "Sounds pretty low maintenance to me. In fact, total neglect might be a better description."

Cook has his own ideas about what a low maintenance, "ecolawn" should and could be.

"An 'ecolawn' should be compatible with typical uses for conventional lawns including sitting, strolling, general play, and as a backdrop for the rest of the landscape," he said. "It isn't a wild flower meadow."

"My goal has been to combine grasses with selected broadleaf plants in an attempt to produce an ecologically stable mixture of plants that would persist with fewer inputs than a typical lawn," he said. "Specifically, I wanted to reduce mowing, irrigation, fertilizer and pesticides. It has never been my intention to eliminate any of these inputs - just to reduce them."

Cook says that if you want a beautiful lawn, you have to work at it. If you aren't so picky, low maintenance lawn "ecology" lawn mixtures may be for you.

If you are interested in planting an ecolawn, the following seed companies offer mixtures based on Cook's work: Nichols Garden Nursery, 1190 N. Pacific Hwy., Albany, OR 97321 ("Ecology Lawn Mix" - different mixtures offered for northern and dryland conditions); Pro-Time Lawn Seed, 1712 S.E. Ankeny St., Portland, OR 97214 ("Fleur de Lawn" flowering lawn mix and "Fragrant Herbal" lawn mix).

These mixtures contain a mix of drought resistant grasses, and other low growing, flowering plants such as yarrow, strawberry clover, shamrock and sweet alyssum.