



## THE GRAINETHUMB

### THE INCREDIBLE SHRIKING LAWN

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*Grass is hard and lumpy and damp, and full of black insects.*

---Oscar Wilde

*Question for the day: Is your lawn looking tired or are you tired of looking at your lawn?*

In 2012, Evelyn Hadden wrote *Beautiful No-Mow Yards: 50 Amazing Alternatives* (Timber Press). One year later, Pam Penick for Ten Speed Press wrote *Lawn Gone!: Low-Maintenance, Sustainable, Attractive Alternatives For Your Yard*. Both books include instructions for anyone who desires to reduce or perhaps eliminate their lawn. Since the Hadden book was previously discussed by the Grainethumb at time of publication (VMGA Report, May/June 2012) he will concentrate on the Penick text.

Lawn Gone is an inspirational treatise using realistic choices, achievable plans and simple instructions on how you can have a beautiful yard with less maintenance and cost. Although the book title suggests complete elimination of the lawn, this is not exactly the case. The point is to have less lawn, a topic that has been trending and receives a lot of interest in the media. Of course you are aware that we won the Revolution; however, this does not mean we should or must have a lawn like the folks across the pond. Put more simply, why must a lawn be the default ground cover? This does not have to be the case and that is why the Lawn Gone book keeps everything about the lawn within a reasoned perspective.

As the book title suggests, a full discussion includes lawn alternatives and recognizes the lawn can have many other purposes such as an area for play, entertaining, pathways and suggests a place to lie down and look at the night sky. (Oh, Grainethumb you are such a romantic.) Other uses for the recouped lawn could be a water feature such as a pond or disappearing water fountain and even a dry stream bed that mimics the feeling of running water. The point is to reduce the size of your lawn and still be able to suit specific purposes. For example, a flagstone patio or seating on a low wooden deck, fire pit, gazebo and more. On the plus side, shrinking your lawn area will result in cost savings – think seed, fertilizer, compost, lime, core aeration, pesticides to combat insects and herbicides to destroy weeds and lest I forget, labor. Face it, you will still need to mow the lawn, edge the lawn and whack down invading weeds. Whether these chores are of the DIY variety or you hire a contractor for some, all of these tasks should be considered in order to have a decent looking lawn.

Lawn Gone does not dispense unrealistic advice. In fact, this book provides information by providing many color photos that help illustrate the points made in writing. Your lawn can be more inviting than just a large green swath. By replacing just a part of your lawn the result will reduce your chores as noted above and will save you time and money. With careful planning you should be able to use less water and because of other options you will become an eco-savvy gardener in the process. Of course this will take

some planning and education on how to integrate low growing ground covers, dwarf shrubs, some ornamental trees, lawn-like ornamental grasses and other grass-like plants that require almost no maintenance. You can have any or all of these plant types including some turf.

In addition to an integrated landscape design, your decision should carefully acknowledge environmental and climate conditions such as sun-shade, soil type and planting deer-resistant plants if you know that is a problem. In other words, subscribe to the gardeners mantra of right plant-right place. All of these considerations ought to help determine a planting palette and thankfully the green industry has provided us with a plethora of possibilities. At full service garden centers you will find many types of improved dwarf flowering shrubs, creeping colorful conifers (beyond just green), and ground covers beyond the ubiquitous pachysandra, vinca minor (periwinkle), lirioppe and ajuga. Some trade-marked ground covers have plant tags with useful information about tolerance to foot traffic and environmental concerns. Plants that fit the moniker of plant du jour for 2016 are the large family of hardy succulents. These are tough plants especially when you pay attention to the hardiness zone otherwise you may end up with a house plant. Hens and chicks are perhaps the most familiar ones although you have a wide variety of choices. Often succulents have been relegated to containers but it does not have to be that way. Be bold! A collection of these plants really makes a statement. In general, seek out ground cover plants that will choke out weeds and spread easily by rooting stems or underground shoots.

Is it heresy to consider moss? Not quite if you develop a positive attitude for this absolutely easy care perennial. Entire books have been written on the beauty of moss including pages of fantastic moss gardens. By the way, moss comes in many shapes and textures. Fair warning....once you get over your aversion to moss, these plants can be addictive and you may wonder why you ever destroyed them. More heresy! The dreaded (by some) English ivy can be a superb ground cover. This plant is easy to maintain with a pruner. The prime concern is not to let this plant get out of selected bounds or climb a tree.

Words of caution: If you reside in a community “governed” by a home owner association the author includes a chapter on how to contend with their rules as well as county and city regulations. These rules or ordinances often apply to the front yard; however, this is not always the case. For example, if you have lake-front property, your HOA may have an invasive species list that needs to be respected. It is imperative that you know the plant limitations in advance of any lawn makeover. This should prevent problems due to your lack of understanding.

Addendum: If the Lawn Gone approach is not in your plan for a makeover, then perhaps you may want to consider a way to grow a lawn organically. Dr. Sarah Little wrote a 55 page booklet called *Introduction to Organic Lawns and Yards Plus a Checklist for an Eco-Friendly Property*. The June 2016 edition is an update from the original work published in 2011. Dr. Little shows how and why you should change from traditional methods of lawn care in order to achieve a sustainable and ecological framework for your landscaping practices. Simply put, you should be able to maintain your property with a minimum of fuss as well as cost. Now you have two very different approaches to the lawn although there is no reason why the organic way for lawn care cannot be combined with the Lawn Gone approach. It appears that the combination of both ideas can solve many problems.