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## Chapter 1

# Thinking about Design

**W**hether you're starting out with a new lawn installation, considering renovating an existing lawn, or pondering how a lawn fits into your landscape as a whole, you'll soon be making some important decisions.

Start by asking yourself, "What do I want my lawn to do for me?" You might, for example, want your lawn to be a welcoming place where you and your family can spend time outdoors, relaxing in the hammock, playing croquet, and firing up the grill for weekend barbecues. Perhaps you envision your lawn as an attractive setting for perennial gardens and other ornamental plantings. Or maybe your homeowners association has specific rules about the lawn on your property. (It's best to check with them first before you make major changes.)

The information in this chapter will help you understand your options so you can design the lawn that's right for you.

## Lawns, Defined

Simply put, a lawn is garden of grasses and other durable plants that together form a ground cover. This carpet of green offers an inviting, resilient surface that can withstand people walking and kids playing. That said, not everyone's interpretation of a lawn is the same. To some people, a lawn should be neatly manicured. To others, a lawn can be wilder and a little rougher around the edges.

Wherever you fit on that spectrum, a healthy, thriving lawn provides you with a host of benefits.

## Lawns: A look back

Grasses are some of the few plants that can withstand the repeated cutting back to near ground level (more on that in Chapter 3). The concept of lawns dates back centuries — even millennia — when grazing livestock kept land open by nibbling vegetation and prevented shrubs and other woody plants from taking over.

In medieval Europe, maintaining a perimeter of low-growing plants offered guards at castles and estates an unobstructed view of their surroundings so they could easily scan for threats. Later, settlers in North America cultivated open, treeless spaces around their houses as way to tame the wildness surrounding them.

It wasn't until the 1700s that landscape designers in England and France began promoting the idea that a well-kept lawn was a symbol of high social status and evidence that the property owners were of sufficient means to have time for recreational activities. Commoners, in contrast, had to use their land for sustenance — for growing vegetables, fruits, and herbs and for grazing their animals. Only the wealthy had the resources needed to maintain unproductive “lawns” (a term that originally referred to a natural open area in the woods), as well as the leisure time to enjoy them. Today, well-maintained, grass-covered yards are the norm, so much so that municipalities and homeowners associations — and sometimes neighbors — demand them. As you read on, keep in mind that highly manicured lawns are a relatively recent phenomenon!

## What lawns do for you

There are good reasons that most landscapes incorporate areas of mown grass around the house. Here are some of the benefits of lawns.

- » **Aesthetic:** A well-kept lawn acts as an inviting bridge between your home and landscape elements like patios and ornamental plantings. Green grass offers a backdrop for creative expression, such as flower beds and yard décor. Lawns help trap the road dust kicked up by vehicles, as well as wind-borne debris and pollen.
- » **Recreational:** Where but on a lawn can you play catch with your kids, set up a badminton game, or kick around a soccer ball? Grass is the perfect play surface — it's soft and forgiving, yet tough and durable. Family get-togethers, summer picnics, and neighborhood gatherings would be much less enjoyable if the yard was just a patch of dirt or filled with prickly weeds.

- » **Environmental:** Like all green plants, lawn grasses absorb carbon dioxide from the air and give back fresh oxygen. In contrast to bare soil and paved surfaces, lawns slow the movement of water and allow rainwater to permeate the soil rather than running off into storm drains and overwhelming sewer systems. Grass plants have deep, fibrous root systems that help hold soil in place, decreasing the erosion of precious topsoil. A lawn maintained using sustainable, environmentally friendly techniques promotes a healthy soil ecosystem that, in turn, supports healthy plants. Replacing heat-absorbing pavement with lawns and landscape plants helps cool the air around your home, reducing the need for air conditioning.
- » **Financial:** “Curb appeal” adds real value to your home. A well-maintained lawn and landscape can increase a property’s value by 15 percent or more, while a bedraggled one may turn away potential buyers before they even get to the front door.

## Considering Sustainability

Now that we’ve sung the praises of lawns, let’s look at the other side of the coin. Lawns that are manicured to perfection are significant consumers of limited resources, such as fertilizers and water. In addition, improper application and overuse of the insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides employed by many homeowners and lawn care companies can cause significant harm to the environment. Lawns will always have their place, but it’s important to be practical about them and keep in mind the cost of the “perfect” lawn.

According to the National Wildlife Federation, lawns cover over 40 million acres of land in the United States, and they consume immense resources, including a mindboggling 9 billion gallons of water per day. In return, most lawns offer little in the way of food or habitat for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife. Creating a landscape that serves all life forms — human and wild — starts by envisioning your yard as part of the larger ecosystem. It doesn’t require sacrificing your patch of green lawn! Instead, it invites you to consider how you define your ideal landscape.



TIP

As you design your lawn and landscape, consider including features that help counter the environmental challenges posed by expansive, manicured lawns. Learn more about these in Chapter 19, Chapter 22, and Chapter 23.

Here are some landscape options that support wildlife, conserve and protect water supplies, and/or require less maintenance than traditional lawns.

- » **Pollinator gardens:** The plight of pollinators continues to make headlines, with good reason. About one out of every three bites of the food we eat depends on pollinators, so protecting them is of utmost importance. Replacing some of your lawn with wildflowers, incorporating native plants in your landscape, and reducing your use of lawn chemicals are good places to start.
- » **Xeriscaping:** First coined in 1981 by the Denver Water Department, the term xeriscaping (pronounced ZARE-eh-scape-ing or ZEER-eh-scape-ing) refers to a style of landscaping that is focused on water conservation and reducing the need for irrigation while still maintaining an attractive landscape. Denver, Colorado, like many arid and semiarid areas of the western United States, doesn't receive enough natural rainfall to support lush lawns. Xeriscaping (also known as water-wise or dry landscape gardening) offers alternatives, such as replacing thirsty turfgrass and gardens with drought-tolerant plants — especially native plants that are well-adapted to the climate and support local wildlife. Some municipalities even offer rebates and other incentives for replacing lawns with less water-intensive landscape options.
- » **Rain gardens:** Located in naturally occurring or human-made low spots in your landscape, rain gardens collect water runoff so the soil can slowly absorb it and recharge the groundwater. As a bonus, you can plant your rain garden with water-tolerant native plants to provide food and habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.
- » **Low-mow and no-mow lawns:** Planting slow-growing dwarf grasses allows you to mow less often compared to traditional turfgrasses. The nonprofit Pollinator Partnership (<https://pollinator.org>) advocates for the planting of “bee lawns” made up of low-growing flowering ground covers, such as creeping thyme, that don't need mowing. Although many pollinating insects don't sting, if you're hesitant to plant bee-friendly plants in areas that get lots of foot traffic, choose out-of-the-way spots for this alternative.
- » **No Mow May:** The goal of this initiative, originally launched in the United Kingdom but now gaining traction in North America, is to pause mowing in May. This allows any flowers in your lawn to bloom so they can provide nectar to pollinators at a time when there may be few other plants in bloom.
- » **Meadowscaping, wildscaping, and “lazy lawns”:** Transforming some of your lawn into a meadow, choosing plants to support wildlife, and allowing some of your lawn to go without regular fertilizing and irrigation are ways to reduce the resources needed to maintain a manicured lawn. Learn more about planting a wildflower meadow in Chapter 21.

# Deciding on Design

Although most yards share a few common elements, such as walkways and areas of lawn, your landscape is as unique as you are. You get to decide what features you want to incorporate and what atmosphere you want to create. It's time to look at how and where a lawn fits into your overall landscape plan.

## Determining the size

Lawns are usually one of the most labor-intensive parts of a landscape. You need to mow, water, fertilize, and more. It just makes sense to consider how much time you want to spend on your lawn — and what else you might want to do with some of that time, even if it's lounging in a hammock!

What activities do you realistically need lawn space for? By looking carefully at how people use lawns, water agencies in the West determine that many people only need about 600 to 800 square feet of grass. This is about the size of a standard three-car garage or pickleball court, and it's enough for a small play area and some lawn chairs. Now, if you want to play volleyball, badminton, or croquet, you need a little more lawn. A rectangle measuring  $45 \times 80$  feet (3,600 square feet) is plenty.

The average size lot in the United States is about 14,000 square feet, or  $\frac{1}{3}$  acre. Subtracting the size of the average house (2,500 square feet) plus extra for driveway and paths, that leaves about 10,000 square feet of yard space. That's far more lawn than the average family will use! Knowing this opens the door to more interesting, environmentally friendly, and time-saving choices. Leaving an area of the yard in its natural state, if you're lucky to have such a spot, is the simplest place to start. For example, if part of your yard is naturally wooded, consider leaving it that way. Allowing an out-of-the-way section of your yard to become overgrown (as long as it's not with invasive plants) provides habitat for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife.

## Integrating lawns into your landscape plans

Even if your lot is a square or rectangle, your lawn doesn't have to be. Circular lawns, kidney-shaped lawns, and undulating swathes of lawn are usually more visually interesting. In addition, an irregularly shaped lawn can soften the effects of a square yard surrounded by a tall fence. Start by pondering these questions:

» **Where will you put your lawn?** A backyard lawn makes sense because that's where the kids can play safely and where you can relax, and it offers refuge from street noise and neighbors. A well-maintained front lawn makes the face

of the house more pleasing and inviting, and it might even be mandated by your homeowners association or municipality. Whether you want lawn on the sides of your house depends on how you use those spaces and how accessible they are for mowing.

- » **What other plantings will you include?** The soft formality of a lawn offers an appealing contrast to areas planted with trees, shrubs, and flowers. Planting a vegetable garden? Choosing the sunniest spot for the best yields. What about some berry bushes to provide fruit for you or for wildlife? Consider some of the other landscape options mentioned earlier in this chapter, such as a wildflower planting or rain garden.
- » **Are you renovating or starting from scratch?** If you're starting with a well-established landscape that you're happy with, you may want to keep existing features in place and focus your efforts on renovating existing lawn areas. If you're starting from scratch, the sky's the limit!

Make a list of all the existing features in your landscape, such as patios, fences, arbors, walkways, and sheds. Then make a wish list of features you hope to add in the future. You'll want to keep all these in mind as you begin designing your lawn.

## Putting Pencil to Paper

Now it's time to put your ideas down on paper. This book doesn't have room for a complete lesson in landscaping, but sometimes simply putting some rough shapes on paper can really help you visualize what your lawn may look like.

### Drawing a landscape map

Here are the steps to drawing a landscape map.

1. **Take a piece of graph paper and rough out a sketch of the house and yard, trying to keep it to scale (1 inch to 10 or 20 feet usually works).**  
You'll probably have to take a few measurements outdoors to get the dimensions of your house right. Mark the directions (north, south, east, west) on the map.
2. **Sketch in the driveway as well as your garage, shed, patio, and so on.**
3. **Add circles to note the locations of large trees and shrubs.**
4. **Add the approximate locations of any flower beds and vegetable gardens, either existing ones or those you plan to install.**

You don't need to get these exact; this sketch is just a starting point.

**5. Note where shade from buildings and large trees falls at different times of day and sketch this on the map.**

Lawn grasses grow best in full sun to part shade. Areas in deep shade are best planted with shade-loving plants or used for other purposes.

**6. Mark any low-lying areas that stay wet for more than 24 hours after a heavy rain.**

These would be good spots for a rain garden. If needed, you may be able to install drainage or regrade the slope to direct water away from areas you hope to plant in lawn. Learn more about drainage in Chapter 7.

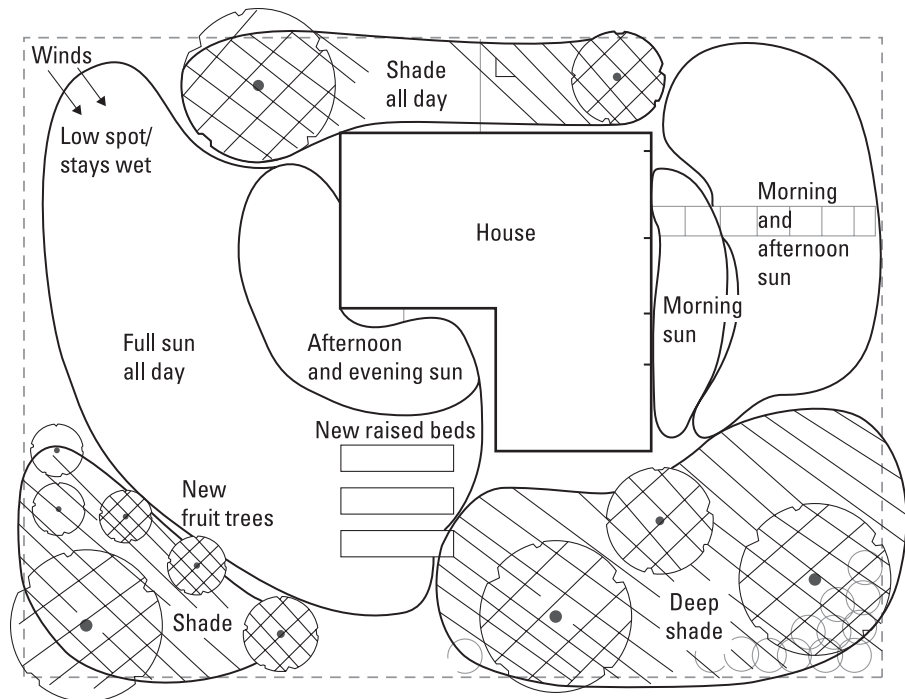
**7. Note possible locations for the landscape features from your wish list.**

The open areas remaining in your sketch are likely spots for your lawn. Figure 1-1 shows a sample landscape map.



TIP

As you design the shape of your lawn, keep in mind all the maintenance chores. Awkward spaces and narrow strips, for example, can be difficult to mow and water properly.



**FIGURE 1-1:**  
Example  
of a rough  
landscape map.

## Working with professional designers

If your landscape is large or has lots of elements, or if you're just unsure of where to start, you may want to get help from a professional. Although there's an upfront cost, getting professional advice can save you time, money, and aggravation in the long run, and, best of all, it can help ensure you get the lawn and landscape of your dreams.

A *landscape designer* can help you figure out the best layout for the various features in your yard. They can recommend the best spot for new gardens and other elements, offer plant suggestions, and generally help you envision how you to make the most of your yard. You can hire them simply to offer suggestions or to draw up as detailed a plan as you'd like. They may be able to offer recommendations for landscape contractors that build or install the landscape elements you decide on. Landscape designers aren't required to have any professional degree or license.

A *landscape architect* may be the right professional for you if you hope to install extensive hardscape elements, like patios and stone walls, and/or water features like ponds. A landscape architect has a university degree and a license from the state you live in. They generally work on large-scale residential, commercial, and municipal projects. If your yard poses big challenges, such as rocky outcrops or dramatically steep slopes, they have the know-how to help. You can meet with them for a simple consultation or hire them to draw up a complete landscape plan. Some landscape architects will also arrange for subcontractors to do landscape installations under their supervision.

## Designing a Low-Maintenance Lawn

One of the simplest ways to reduce the time and money needed to maintain your lawn is to make it smaller! In addition, you can incorporate some of the following design techniques to make your lawn easier to care for:

- » **Put in mowing strips.** These strips are usually several inches wide and encircle all or part of your lawn. Usually made of cement or wood, they sit at ground level and allow you to run the wheels of your lawn mower right up to the edge of the grass so that you don't have to come back and trim by hand later. Mowing strips also can prevent aggressive lawn grasses from growing out of bounds and becoming weeds in nearby planting areas.



- » **Use edgings.** Edgings are usually thinner and often less permanent than mowing strips. They are also less expensive and easier to install. Even though you can't run your mower wheels on top of them, edgings can help keep grasses in bounds and give your lawn a nice clean edge. They also can make the lawn easier to trim. Learn more about edgings in Chapter 8.
- » **Don't plant lawns in narrow or awkwardly shaped areas.** Narrow strips of grass like you usually see between street and sidewalks are hard to mow and almost impossible to water properly. Go with a ground cover or other lawn alternative (see Chapter 19) — that is, if your city or homeowners association lets you. Some cities and associations require grass in these narrow strips.
- » **Don't plant lawns on steep slopes.** Grass growing on a steep incline is dangerous to mow. Slopes are also hard to water; the water quickly runs off before the soil can absorb any of it.
- » **Don't plant lawns in heavily shaded areas.** Some grasses can grow in light shade, but most prefer full sun and will struggle in deep shade. Don't bother trying to grow grass under trees with dense foliage. In addition to the deep shade they cast, the trees' roots battle with the lawn for water and nutrients. And the trees almost always win.
- » **Keep a grass-free zone around trees and shrubs.** Remove grass and weeds in a 2- to 3-foot diameter circle at the base of trees and shrubs and apply a thin layer of organic mulch, such as bark chips, to help keep weeds at bay. (Keep the mulch a few inches away from the trunks to prevent rot, and never pile mulch against the trunks.) You'll reduce the time needed for string trimming and also reduce the chance of damaging the trunks with the mower or trimmer. Learn more about lawn trees in Chapter 20.

