

YardSmart

Lawn alternatives and groundcovers

Transform your yard by replacing a portion of your lawn with beautiful alternatives that attract pollinators and reduce maintenance. Enjoy a water wise and resilient landscape that thrives in Calgary.



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Microclover and turfgrass mix

Why choose lawn alternatives and groundcovers?

Choosing an alternative to traditional turf in your garden offers numerous benefits. Lawn alternatives and hardy groundcovers use less water than a traditional lawn, attract pollinators, benefit insects and songbirds, create year-round interest and support a lower maintenance gardening approach. Examples of suitable species include microclover, yarrow, creeping thyme and fescue grasses. These plants are increasingly available at garden centres, often sold as seeds, tiles or plugs.

There are many ways to bring lawn alternatives into your landscape. Whether expanding existing garden beds, overseeding trouble spots and bare patches, or starting on bare soil. Planting lawn alternatives also makes your yard more resilient and integrated with natural green spaces.

The best part is you can do this step-by-step over time, or in a single transformation.

Four ways to transition to lawn alternatives

1. Shrink existing lawn by extending existing garden beds further into your lawn. New garden beds can also replace former trouble spots in lawns.

2. Remove lawn around trees and install tree wells (a grassless area around the base of a tree that extends to the outermost branches of trees). Top the bare soil with mulch and, if desired, plant with perennial groundcovers in the future.

3. Remove lawn and reseed or replant with lawn alternatives.

Two ways to remove existing lawn:

- Dig up the sod (either by hand or for large areas using a powered sod cutter), flip it over so the grass is facing downwards, and cover with soil so no grass shows. Let sit for a month. Top with compost or new soil before planting. For a smoother removal, water your lawn a couple days beforehand as moist soil is much easier to work with than dry or very wet soil.
- In fall, smother the lawn by covering with several layers of damp newspaper, or cardboard. Top with compost or soil to keep wet. Plant in the springtime.

If you are starting with bare soil:

- Top with compost or new soil, and then plant with a lawn alternative seed mix, potted/plug material or turf.

4. Overseed patchy areas of lawn – Top-dress an existing lawn with loam or any high-quality soil (2-inch depth is sufficient), rake it level throughout the area, sprinkle seed according to packaging or cultivar preference, lightly rake in the seed with a spring rake/leaf rake, water consistently until established. Do not walk on new seed/new seedlings.

Tips for success

- Gradual changes are budget-friendly and require less labour.
- Weeding may be required to reduce competition for water and nutrients.
- Water newly planted areas consistently for two growing seasons to promote strong roots. Follow the watering instructions that accompany each plant or seed packet.
- Work with the attributes of your site and use plants that grow favorably in your conditions.
- Source seeds and plants as locally as possible, and from a reputable supplier, to ensure they are acclimated to our unique growing conditions.
- Herbicide and pesticide application is not recommended for lawn alternatives.
- Consider discussing major changes to your landscape with your neighbour and be sure to maintain your lawn according to Community Standards Bylaw.

For more tips on how to create a garden that thrives in Calgary, visit calgary.ca/yardsmart

Plant list

The table below highlights important characteristics of plants that have been used as common lawn alternatives or hardy ground covers in Calgary. Some plant suggestions look and behave more like a traditional lawn than others, so ensure the alternative you choose meets the needs of your space and works with the characteristics of your yard.

Plant	Drought tolerance	Rate of spread	Foot-traffic tolerance	Sun exposure	Maintenance	Special considerations
Common lawn alternatives						
Microclover	Moderate	Aggressive	High	Part to full sun	Occasional mowing to manage size and flower stalks. No fertilizer needed.	Slow to establish. Blends well with grasses.
Fescue	High	Quick	Moderate	Part to full shade	Occasional mowing. Fertilizer optional.	Clumping and non-clumping types available. Blends well with grasses.
Groundcovers						
Yarrow	High	Aggressive	Moderate	Part to full sun	Occasional mowing to manage size and flower stalks. No fertilizer needed.	Blends well with grasses.
Creeping Thyme	High	Moderate	Light	Full sun	No mowing needed. Fertilizer optional.	Height depends on plant variety. Some varieties flower early.
Sedum	High	Moderate	None, especially not in winter	Full sun	No mowing. Occasional trimming to manage flower stalks. No fertilizer needed.	Slow to come out of dormancy in the spring.
Pussy Toes	Moderate – high	Slow	Moderate	Part to full sun	No mowing. Occasional trimming to manage flower stalks. No fertilizer needed.	Likes poor soil.
Wild Strawberry	Moderate	Moderate	Light to None	Part to full sun	No mowing. Occasional trimming. No fertilizer needed.	Grows fruit.
Kinnikinnick	Moderate	Slow	None	Part to full shade	No mowing. Fertilizer optional (low-nitrogen fertilizer)	Woody shrub. Best used on slopes.

Lawn alternatives and groundcovers

Microclover (*Trifolium repens* var. 'Pirouette' and 'Pipolina')

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Microclover and turfgrass mix

This low-growing variety of clover is a great lawn alternative, featuring smaller leaves and fewer flowers compared to other clover varieties. It's less clump-forming and mixes well into existing lawns. Microclover also enriches the soil by adding nitrogen and attracts pollinators to your yard. During periods of high heat or drought, it may require reseeding. Due to its prolific growth, hardscaping may be needed to prevent it from spreading beyond desired areas. Other clover varieties to consider include Dutch White Clover and Alsike Clover.

Sedum (*Sedum* spp)

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These low-growing succulents are known for their unique multicolored foliage that lasts all summer into late fall and winter. This low maintenance option is easy to grow, typically doesn't require fertilizer once established, attracts beneficial insects and thrives in poor, well-draining soils.

Pussy Toes (*Antennaria* spp)

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Pussy Toes in flower, untrimmed

This groundcover forms a low carpet of beautiful blue-grey leaves with long-lasting white or rosy-pink flowers that attracts pollinators and beneficial insects. It grows best in well-draining soils and doesn't need fertilizing once established. Certain varieties are native to Alberta, making it acclimated to prairie conditions like poor soil, hot windy summers and slopes.

Fescues (*Festuca* spp)

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Mowed vs. not-mowed Fescue blend

Fescue grasses come in several varieties, including red, sheep, hard and chewing fescues. These hardy grasses quickly go dormant during droughts but retain their green color. They require less fertilizer than traditional turf grasses, and some varieties are native to Alberta. Fescues are often available as blends of different varieties and mix well with other grasses and Microclover.

Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*)



A hardy native perennial that flowers late spring and begins to produce small, sweet edible berries in early summer. Plants send out elongated stems or runners which produce clones that root and repeat the same cycle, spreading naturally. The flowers attract many types of pollinators. Songbirds eat the fruit if you are not quick enough to harvest. They grow well in most types of soil.

Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)



Yarrow in flower

This perennial has fern-like leaves which form rosettes in dense mats and flowers that bloom in mid to late summer. It does well in poor soil and attracts pollinators and beneficial insects. Certain varieties are native to Alberta, and it generally does not require soil amendments to grow successfully.

Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)

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A native low-growing woody groundcover with round, evergreen leaves and red berries. It does well on slopes and in well-draining soils. Kinnikinnick grows 15 cm tall and is excellent along borders and in the understory of shrubs and trees.

Creeping Thyme (*Thymus* spp)

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There are many varieties of creeping thyme, but they are generally prolific flower producers, creating a beautiful pink carpet while in bloom. These early blooms are important forage for honeybees and other pollinators. It does best in well-draining sandy soil but can be planted in poor soil and even on slopes. If starting from seed, it can take several seasons for it to establish.