

The
Greening
of
**Your
Lawn**

EASY THINGS YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE YOUR LAWN AND SAVE WATER

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Table of Contents

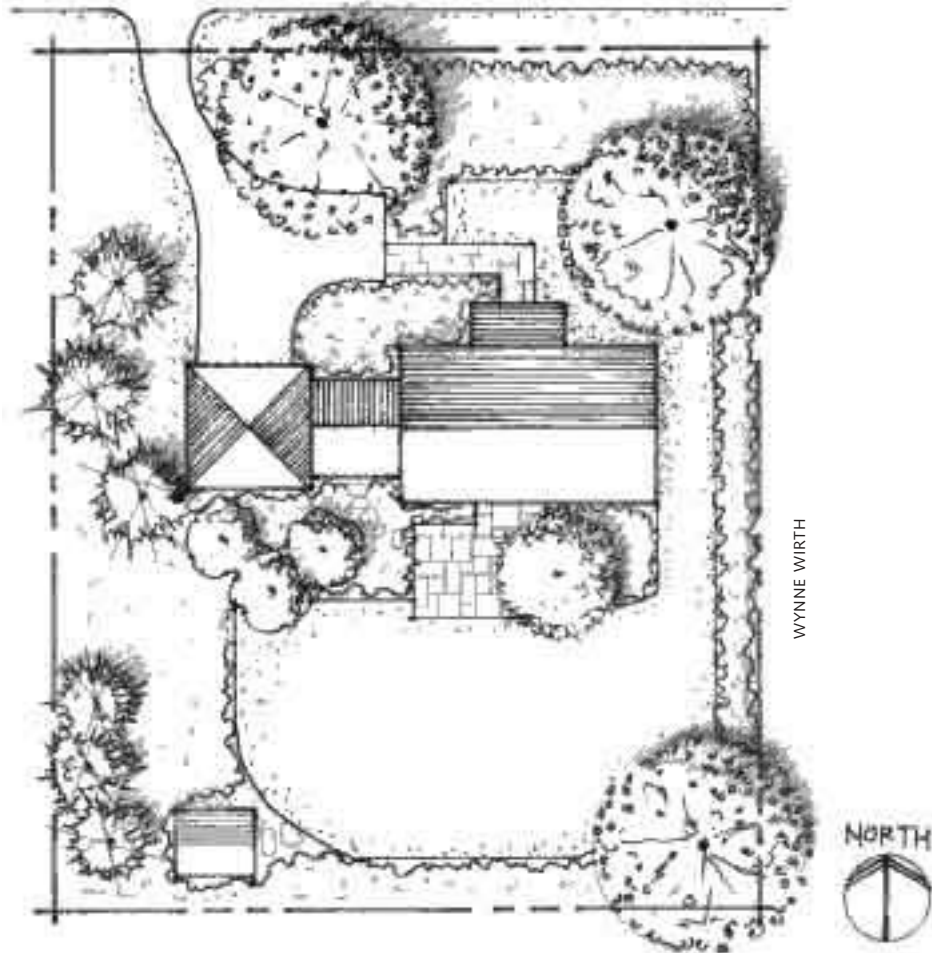
- 1 A Sign of Summer: "Water Ban"
- 3 Planting and Fertilizing
- 5 Mowing
- 7 Watering
- 8 Problems
- 9 It takes more than a lawn to make an attractive landscape
- 11 Native Plants
- 12 Why rock the boat?
- 13 Resources

*A Sign of Summer:
"Water Ban"*

WHEN THE WEATHER gets warm, signs of summer start to appear: top-down convertibles, roadside farm stands, outdoor concerts, and actual signs, too, that read "Water Ban: Mandatory." Increasingly, towns in Massachusetts have been forced to impose restrictions on "non-essential" water use such as lawn watering. A growing population and a constant—and in drought years, declining—water supply mean that we all need to be more careful about how we use water, and more mindful of what we use it for. But what if you are a homeowner who has invested time and money in landscaping? Letting the lawn and plants go dry is not an appealing option. This pamphlet offers ideas about how to make the most of a dry summer, watering bans and all, and how to plan future landscaping that will need less water.

A growing population and spreading development are taxing water supplies faster than many towns can develop plans to meet the demand.

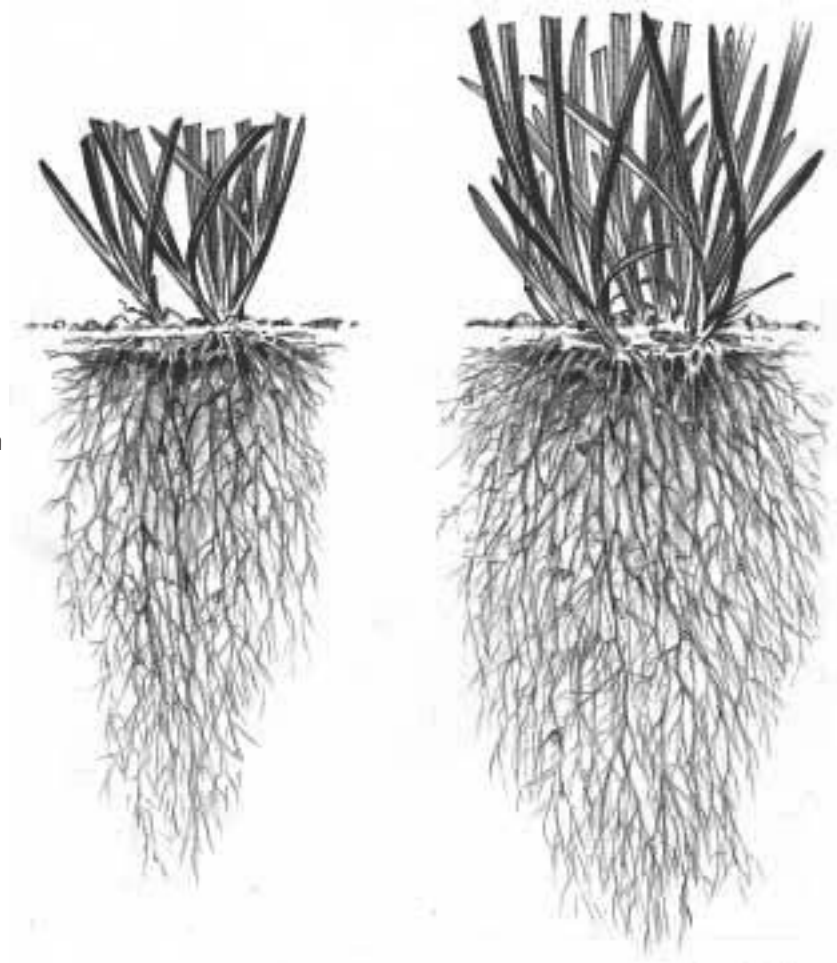
- ✓ Soil is tested. Lime and fertilizer are applied based on recommendations.
- ✓ Seed selected for specific site conditions: shade, sunlight, high traffic.
- ✓ Small lawn area minimizes maintenance and water needs.
- ✓ Grass clippings are left on lawn or composted, not put out with the trash.
- ✓ Trees shade house in summer; after leaves fall, sunlight warms house in winter.



Planting and Fertilizing

- **NEW ENGLAND SOILS** tend to be more acidic than is optimal for turf grass. Applying limestone will reduce soil acidity, but have your soil tested. The University of Massachusetts Extension Service provides soil testing, and will tell you how much lime to apply, and recommend other soil amendments.
- Select the right seed. Not all grasses do well in all climates. Around here your best bets are varieties of red or tall fescue, which are more tolerant of the dry and acidic soil conditions that are typical in New England.
- Less is ... well, less. A smaller lawn will be easier to care for and require less time and less maintenance—less fertilizing, seeding, weeding, mowing, and watering. Lawn care equipment is responsible for about five percent of air pollution in areas that don't meet federal air quality standards, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Using lawn equipment less will mean less air pollution, not to mention dust and noise, also forms of pollution.

Leaving your lawn at least two inches tall—three inches is even better—will help your grass develop healthy, robust roots.



GORDON MORRISON

Mowing

- **SHARP MOWER BLADES** will make clean cuts that make the lawn look greener and neater, so have your mower sharpened. Dull blades make ragged cuts that make grass leaves more susceptible to fungal diseases.
- Don't overdo it when you mow. Keeping your grass as high as three inches (and not shorter than two inches) does a few things that help it: the grass makes its own shade and reduces water evaporation from the soil; the increased leaf area produces more food that helps develop more robust root systems; the taller grass and stronger roots help crowd out weeds such as dandelions; and your lawn will look more luxurious.
- Mow often enough that you don't remove more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the height of the grass with each mowing. Think of mowing as "pruning."
- What to do with grass clippings? Leave the clippings on the ground. They'll decompose and benefit your lawn. Don't throw away all of that good organic matter. Leaving the cuttings is better for your soil and grass because they hold water and provide nutrients for the soil.

One inch of water will moisten the soil to a depth of about six inches, promoting deep root growth.



GORDON MORRISON

Watering

A deep watering once every week or two is all that a healthy lawn should need.

- **WATER DEEPLY** so that you moisten a good four to six inches below the surface. That requires only about an inch of rainfall or water from your sprinkler. Use a rain gauge or a can (a standard six-ounce tuna fish can is about an inch deep) to help you measure how much water your lawn gets in a week. Light watering can be worse than no watering at all because shallow root systems will develop, leaving your lawn more vulnerable to pests and disease.
- It's natural for grass to lose its green luster in the heat of summer. Limiting your watering in late July and early August can minimize both fungal diseases and the growth and development of eggs of Japanese and other beetles which develop into grubs that eat grass roots.
- If the lawn is not watered during the hot summer months, it may go into a dormant brown stage. Unless conditions are extreme, the grass will turn green again in the fall when conditions are cooler and damper—the kind of weather turf grass is really adapted to.
- Make sure your hose, spigot, and sprinkler connections are tight. New hose washers are inexpensive and can save a lot of water that would otherwise be wasted through leaks.

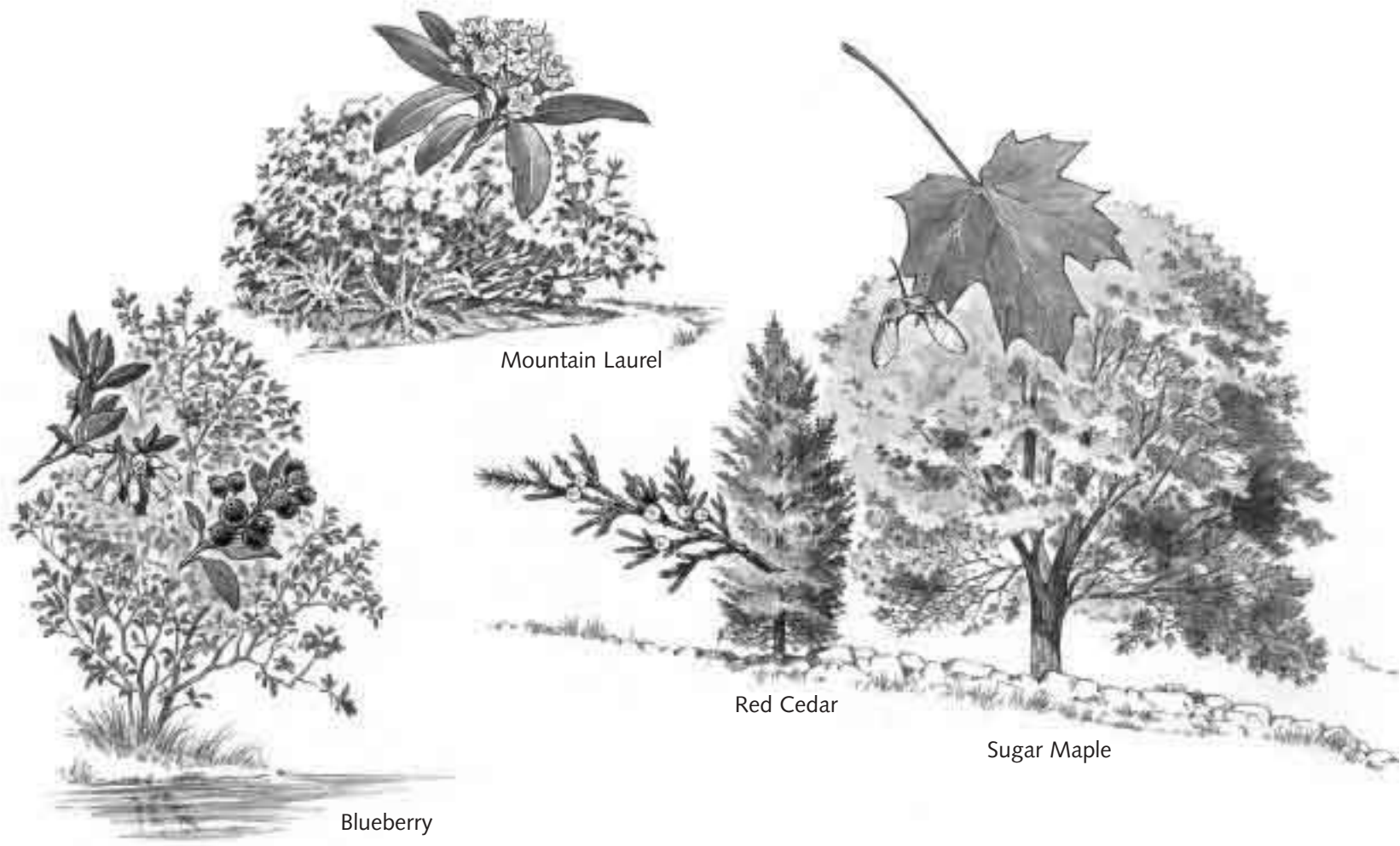
Problems

It won't happen overnight, but over the course of a season or two, you'll see great progress.

- **BE PATIENT.** If you're moving away from a routine of chemical lawn care, don't expect to make dramatic changes to your lawn overnight. It will take time. There are new organic/ecological programs available through garden centers to help you make this transition.
- The plants, animals, microbes, and the soil makeup of your yard all affect each other. Change one thing and it will affect something else. A pesticide that "solves" one problem may kill beneficial insects or microbes that protect your lawn from other problems. Too much fertilizer can actually weaken your lawn.
- For grubs there are no surefire remedies or preventions, either chemical or ecological. Milky spore bacteria (*Bacillus popilliae*) will often provide long-term, safe protection for a lawn. Talk with your garden center or ecological landscaper for their recommendations.
- Get professional help. Landscapers who specialize in ecological lawn care can get you back on track when your lawn isn't doing as well as you'd like. Many happily work with homeowners who want to do some of the work themselves. You can find them through the Ecological Landscaping Association (617 436-5838 or www.ela-ecolandscapingassn.org).

*It takes more than a
lawn to make an
attractive landscape*

A HOUSE AND YARD with nothing but lawn would seldom be regarded as nicely landscaped. A mix of flowering plants, ground covers, shrubs, and trees make up what most Americans think of as “good landscaping.” Increasingly, people are planting their yards with more than just a lawn and some shrubs around the foundation. There’s an interest in less lawn and more of other things. Flowering and fruiting trees, ornamental and native shrubs, themed gardens, and water gardens are a few of the popular choices. Flowering perennials and shrubs, attractive in their own right, can attract butterflies and birds that add even more interest to your yard. Trees serve as natural filters to block dust, they provide cooling shade in summer that helps hold moisture in the soil, and they provide shelter and food for birds.



Mountain Laurel

Blueberry

Red Cedar

Sugar Maple

Native Plants

- asters
- azaleas
- bee balms
- blueberries
- dogwoods
- maples
- mountain laurel
- oaks
- red cedar
- viburnums
- white pines

- **THE NEW ENGLAND LANDSCAPE** features many plants that have been here for thousands of years—some maples and oaks, white pines, certain dogwoods, mountain laurel, native azaleas, blueberries, some viburnums, bee balms, and asters, for example. These are known as “native plants.” They look good because they belong in the landscape, and they offer other benefits, too.
- Native plants provide food and shelter for native animals. Many birds attracted to seeds and berries in winter also eat large numbers of insects in warm weather. Trees and shrubs do a good job of holding water in the soil. Their roots and trunks interrupt the flow of water so that it doesn’t run off too quickly. The leafy canopy of a tree, shrub, or ground cover reduces evaporation in summer by shading the ground underneath and cooling your yard.

Why rock the boat?

MAKING THE CHANGE toward a more natural, more healthy lawn doesn't have to be an event, it can be a process. People who make these changes in their yards have all kinds of reasons, from wanting landscaping that looks interesting to having concerns over the possible health risks of pesticides and fertilizers to their children, their pets, themselves, and the environment. If you use a lawn service, you don't have to stop. Ask about ecological alternatives. Lawn care companies and landscapers are increasingly attuned to these issues and many now offer ecological treatments instead of the more common chemical treatments. If you have an in-ground irrigation system, you can make sure that it's not watering too little or too often, watering during rain storms, or during the middle part of the day when much of the water may be lost to evaporation. If you take care of your lawn yourself, you might investigate organic, slow-release fertilizers. There are lots of small steps you can take that, combined, will go a long way toward improving the health of your landscape and your local environment.

Resources

Ecological Landscaping Association

60 Thoreau Street, #252
Concord, MA 01742-2498
617 436-5838
www.ela-ecolandscapingassn.org

University of Massachusetts

Soil Testing Laboratory
413 545-2311
www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/
Before sending soil samples read instructions on the Soil Testing Laboratory's Web site or call the lab for instructions on preparing and shipping soil samples, types of tests, and for fees. The Web site offers instructions and an order form for soil tests.

Mass Audubon

208 South Great Road
Lincoln, MA 01773-4816
781 259-9500
800 AUDUBON
www.massaudubon.org

Learn more about water resource issues: www.massaudubon.org/rivers

New England Wildflower Society

180 Hemenway Road
Framingham, MA 01701-2699
508 877-7630
www.newfs.org



Mass Audubon

208 South Great Road · Lincoln, MA 01773-4816
800 AUDUBON · www.massaudubon.org



Massachusetts Environmental Trust

33 Union Street, 4th floor
Boston, MA 02108
617 727-0249

www.agmconnect.org/maenvtr1.html