Let the Lawn Games Begin

IN THE GARDEN for May 2014 by Kendall Weyers, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

From nutrition to computers, cars to crops, standards around us are ever-changing, evolving as we gain new knowledge and awareness. Improvements are made to make practices more acceptable and appropriate to current conditions. The same is happening with standards for our community landscapes, especially lawns.

Many landowners feel a lush, precisely manicured monoculture of bluegrass or fescue should cover the majority of the landscape. That standard developed during a much different time of ample and cheap supplies of water and fuel, as well as a lack of awareness of the consequences of overreliance on chemical fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and fungicides.

With today’s issues ranging from water quality and availability, noise pollution and air quality to depleted soils and loss of pollinators, it may be worthwhile to re-evaluate lawn standards. Many updated models are being developed. If you are thinking about a change in lawn care practices, consider the following:

**Traditional turf with fewer inputs.** Traditional turf can perform quite well with fewer inputs than we may have assumed. Instead of fertilizing four times a year, consider fertilizing just once or twice. Instead of setting the sprinklers to run three times a week all season, water once a week only when it’s needed. With less fertilizing and watering, mowing frequency should also decrease. Reconsider preventative insecticide and fungicide treatments and just spot-treat weeds (if at all) and use organic treatment options whenever possible.

**A more biodiverse, mixed lawn.** White clover was considered desirable in lawns up until the 1950s because of its ability to fix nitrogen and its low height and tendency to spread. It also is beneficial to pollinators, an important trait considering their current decline. Adding diversity to a lawn increases its resilience and adaptability in challenging weather extremes. You may want to allow or encourage clover or other plants that can tolerate mowing and co-exist with grass, such as birdsfoot trefoil, poppymallow and dwarf yarrow.

**Alternative turfgrasses.** Low-growing native grasses like buffalograss and blue grama are drought-tolerant with limited needs for fertilizer and mowing, making them a great option for a low-maintenance turf. They have limited shade tolerance, however, so they’re only useful in areas with plentiful sun.

**Non-grass groundcovers.** There are many choices of woody or herbaceous low-growing plants that can provide low cover for areas with minimal foot traffic: ajuga, creeping thyme, plumbago and a wide range of sedges and sedums. Some woody options are creeping juniper, vinca, English ivy and wintercreeper.

**Larger planting beds.** A very direct approach is to simply have larger planting beds and less turf. Larger areas of shrubs, perennials and ornamental grasses allow for a rich diversity of colors and textures that change throughout the seasons. Emphasizing natives often improves water quality, soil health and food sources for pollinators and other wildlife.

**Fruit and vegetable garden.** Starting or expanding the space in the yard for growing fruits, vegetables and/or nuts is a productive use of a yard. This approach requires more attention than the others, but the effort also has more rewards.