

Lawnlets: Less is More

A lawnlet that Frank Hyman created for a client. The dominant grass is a creeping red fescue that tolerates some shade. Woodland perennials surround the lawnlet.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY FRANK HYMAN

How much lawn does one household really need? A couple of years ago I was prepared to do without a lawn entirely. As I transformed our weedy, Bermuda grass patch of a front yard into a Whitman's Sampler of gardens, my wife asked, "Can we keep some grass?"

My reply was a frown.

"Just a little? A lawnlet?" she asked.

At this, I brightened and said, "Well, when you put it that way!"

So now in between the French Intensive vegetable garden, the carnivorous plant garden and the bed of meadow perennials you'll find a cozy, wedge-shaped bed of fescue. A lawnlet big enough for a couple of adults and a big, black lab named Molly to loll around on. We use this bed for star-gazing at night and flower-gazing during the day.

I can mow this bed in seven minutes with a sling blade in one hand and a mug of beer in the other while chatting with neighbors as they walk their dog or push a stroller. Talk about multi-tasking. I'd like to see other lawn-proud gardeners try that.

It may not be to your taste, but don't sneer at our micro-patch of grass. If you've ever envied those fields of fescue on some corporate campus or even some

neighbor's plush front lawn, keep in mind that sustaining a non-native plant like fescue in the Southeast is almost as challenging as keeping something as artificial as an aquarium looking good. It takes lots of monitoring and lots of expensive products applied at just the right time and in the right amounts.

Much of the problems with fishkills in our rivers and the decline of shellfish on our coasts stem from the nutrients and herbicides running off of many square miles of lawn. It's not a stretch to say that less lawn could mean more seafood.

While I lounge around on our lawnlet, I spend about five minutes every month or two handpulling the few weeds. A couple of fistfuls of organic lawn fertilizer (18-8-6 from Plant Tone) on Valentine's Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving supplement the nutrients from the lawn clippings that I leave in place to decompose. That and a couple of fistfuls of lime every other year to keep the pH up takes about five minutes tops for maintenance. An occasional watering from a 1950s era sprinkler during the summer and raking the autumn leaves for compost keeps the lawnlet green and lush year-round with no threat to sea life.

The time we used to spend mowing and tending the front yard when it was all



Lawnlet seen from the rooftop. To protect fescue from foot traffic, the bed is surrounded by a path of stone dust (or screenings) that connects with the rest of the garden.

lawn we now use to cut flowers, harvest vegetables, mulch beds with shredded leaves once a year and lay around on our grass bed watching the clouds, flowers and birds.

So how much lawn does one household need? You might just be happy with little more than a lawnlet. We are. **cg**

Frank Hyman is a garden designer residing at Bayleaf Cottage in Durham.