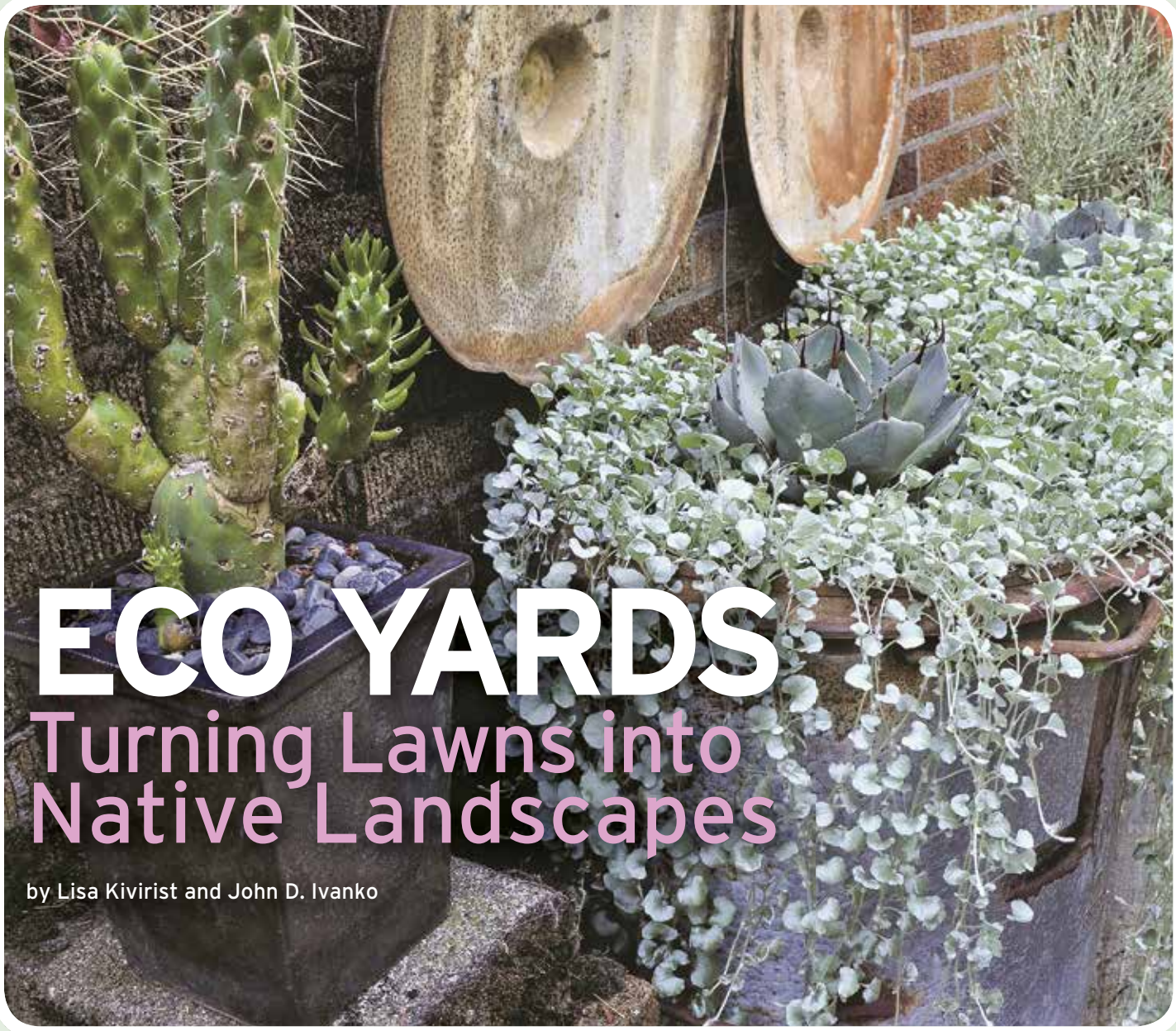
photos by Pam Penick



ECO YARDS

Turning Lawns into Native Landscapes

by Lisa Kivirist and John D. Ivanko

"Traditional turf lawns are an ecological nightmare," says John Greenlee, author of The American Meadow Garden, who notes that most monoculture turf lawns never even get used.

His company, Greenlee and Associates, in Brisbane, California, designs residential and other meadows throughout the U.S. as an engaging alternative. Many other appealing options likewise use native plants appropriate to the local climate. For instance, replacing Kentucky bluegrass, Bermuda grass or another non-native species with natives can deliver drought resistance and lower irrigation needs; eliminate any need for fertilizers or toxic pesticides; reduce or eliminate labor-intensive and often polluting mowing and edging; enhance the beauty of a home; and attract birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

Before replacing a lawn, determine the desired result. It may simply be achieving a low-maintenance, lawn-free yard; growing food like vegetables, herbs, fruit or nuts; or supplying ample flowers for a fresh weekly bouquet. Other benefits might include increasing privacy, dining al fresco, escaping into nature or even sequestering carbon dioxide to reduce climate change.

To be successful, choices must be appropriate to the climate, plant hardiness zone, local zoning ordinances and homeowner association rules. Also consider the soil quality and acidity, moisture content and whether plantings will be in full sun or shade, or both.

The right regional native plants often include grasses and ferns, herbaceous plants like flowering perennials and woody ones like shrubs, vines and trees. Native plants provide shelter and food for wildlife and help preserve a sense of place. "Work with a professional landscaper in your area, ideally a member of the Association for Professional Landscape Designers," advises Greenlee. Tap a local university extension service,

master gardener and garden club for local expertise, often available at no or low cost via classes or club membership.

Four-Season Climates

From the Midwest to New England, "Wild ginger makes a nice, low groundcover with heart-shaped leaves in shade or part shade, where lawn grass often struggles," suggests Pam Penick, of Austin, Texas, author of *Lawn Gone: Low-Maintenance, Sustainable Attractive Alternatives for Your Yard*. "Pennsylvania sedge, a low, grassy, meadow-like groundcover, can also work. For areas with full sun, bearberry, an evergreen creeping shrub with red berry-like fruit in fall, or prairie dropseed, a beautiful prairie grass with sparkling seed heads in fall, might be worth trying."

"Stick with the Carex family of plants, the sedges, for a native meadow," echoes Greenlee. "They vary in color, texture and height. Follow nature's lead and create a tapestry of commingled plants. Start slow and add flowering plants like Queen Anne's lace, daisies, asters and poppies."

Hot and Humid Subtropics

In sunny and well-drained areas of the South, Penick suggests Gulf muhly, an ornamental grass. "Its fall blooms resemble pink cotton candy floating above its green leaves." In Florida, flowering sunshine mimosa with fern-like leaves and other natural groundcovers are low maintenance.

"Basket grass is a low, evergreen grass-like plant with long, spaghetti-type leaves that puddle around it, suitable for shade or partially shaded areas," advises Penick. "It's slow to grow, but highly drought-tolerant and nicely covers a dry slope or spills over a retaining wall. Texas sedge makes a low-growing, meadowy alternative that's evergreen and needs mowing only once every year or two."

Moss is a fine option for shady and moist areas. "If moss is naturally colonizing a patch of yard, allow it to fill in where the lawn doesn't want to grow," Penick counsels. "It makes a springy, evergreen groundcover needing only brief misting to keep it looking good during dry periods."

Mediterranean and California Coast

Plentiful sunshine, rare frosts and modest rainfalls make many California coastal areas perfect for growing lots of plants, rather than plots of water-thirsty turf. "For full sun, work with California yarrow, purple sage, Indian mallow, white sage, lupines and California sagebrush," recommends Charlie Nardozzi, of Ferrisburgh, Vermont, author of *Foodscaping*. "In shade, try mountain yarrow, mimulus monkey flower, California honeysuckle, California flannel bush and coyote mint."

"Blue grama grass is native to many states, and buffalo grass is native to states west of the Mississippi River in the right places," adds Greenlee. They're especially suited for meadows established in drought-prone regions.

Rainy Marine Areas

"For sunny areas, try goat's beard, penstemon, beach strawberry, mock orange and huckleberry," says Nardozzi, who covers gardening nationally at GardeningWithCharlie.com. "For part shade, experiment with gooseberry, red flowering currants, western amelanchier, deer fern, trillium and wild ginger."

Adding some clover to a traditional lawn may eliminate the need for fertilizers while retaining some turf, says Erica Strauss, of Gamonds, Washington, in her Northwest Edible Life blog. "When the clover loses leaf mass from mowing, its roots die off to compensate and nitrogen enters the soil for neighboring plant roots to use." White clover works well for those on a budget; microclover costs more and is even better.

For shady, north-facing or boggy-wet areas, Strauss recommends sweet woodruff. Moss is another option.

Semi-Arid, Steppe and Desert Climes

"If you crave a lawn but want to go native, Habiturf is perfect for the hot, dry Southwest," says Penick. Developed by the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, in Austin, Texas, it's a mix of several native turf grasses, looks like a shaggy traditional lawn and can be occasionally mowed on a high setting to keep it neat. Once established, it needs far less water than traditional turf.

"Silver ponyfoot grows well in many regions as an annual; as a perennial, it needs mild winters," Penick continues. "Native to western Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, it likes good drainage, gravelly soil and full-to-part sun."

Xeriscaping—landscaping that requires little to no water—is especially prevalent in hot, dry regions. Plant picks typically include cactus, succulents, agave and herbs like rosemary or sage.

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More Eco-Yard Ideas

Edible Landscaping

A kitchen garden represented by any kind of edible landscaping replaces some turf grass with produce. Carefully designed and maintained, it can be as attractive as any other garden space. "According to *GardenResearch.com*, 30 million U.S. households, about 25 percent, participated in vegetable gardening in 2015," reports Dave Whitinger, executive director of the National Gardening Association, owned by Dash Works, in Jacksonville, Texas.

"To integrate edibles into a landscape, first assess the locations of sunny and shady spots," says garden consultant Charlie Nardozzi. "Then, identify plants suited to the growing conditions that will fit in those areas. Mix in edibles with flowers, shrubs and groundcovers to keep the yard beautiful." For urban areas, he recommends raised beds and containers as a good way to integrate edibles, bringing in clean soil and moving containers to the sunniest spots in the yard.

"We have 3,000 raised beds in Milwaukee," says Gretchen Mead, executive director of the Victory Garden Initiative, which helps install edible landscapes. "We went from about 35 new kitchen gardens eight years ago to more than 500 each year now."

The easy-to-build raised beds go on top of or in place of turf lawns. For Midwestern residents, Mead recommends beginning with six crops that can be started as transplants, like tomatoes or broccoli, and then growing a couple of plants from seed, like zucchini or green beans.

Water-Saving Gardens

"Water-saving gardens use less of this precious resource through appropriate plant choices, rain-conserving features, berming and terracing to slow runoff, water-permeable hardscaping and smart irrigation practices," says Pam Penick, author of *The Water-Saving Garden*. "Regardless of where you live, saving water is a priority for everyone. Drought is a growing problem in the Southwest and West, but also affects the Midwest, Southeast and even New England."

"Rain gardens help absorb, retain and use rainfall, preventing it from draining into the sewer," agrees Jennifer Riley-Chetwynd, with Colorado's Denver Botanic Gardens. "Rain barrels collect water from gutters and downspouts so there's more control in time and method of distribution, including perhaps drip irrigation."

According to the Groundwater Foundation, in Lincoln, Nebraska, rain gardens can remove up to 90 percent of problematic nutrients and chemicals and up to 80 percent of sediments from rainwater runoff. Compared to a conventional lawn, they allow 30 percent more water to soak into the ground.

Hardscaping

Hardscaped areas are used far more frequently than the turf lawn they replace as we move through spaces like walkways, patios, fountains, decks and grilling areas to enjoy the outdoors. "Plant people can get excited about planting but forget to leave ample space for patios and paths, often resulting in an overgrown, pinched look for seating areas and other places meant to be inviting," cautions Penick. "It can also be easy to underestimate how large plants can grow in a few years. Plan ahead for these 'people spaces' and install them before establishing garden beds."

Landscapers recommend being generous with this technique without paving over paradise. "Plants will spill and lean over hardscaping, so it won't feel too large once your garden is filling in," says Penick. "To address runoff and allow rainwater to soak into the soil, use water-permeable paving wherever possible: gravel, dry-laid flagstone or pavers; even mulch for casual paths."