

Ground Covers and Lawn Alternatives

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This page discusses the pros and cons of some common ground covers and lawn alternatives. The majority of the plants on this page are semi-durable and are discussed here in the context of using them to replace turf grass.

- *A note on drought tolerance*
- A lot of the ground covers listed here are chosen for their drought tolerance. It can be really hard to measure drought tolerance and then compare one plant to another. Climate, heat, soil, etc can make a big difference. One way to attempt this comparison is to look at the required annual rainfall. Not all plants have this info easily available, but I've included this info for ones I can find from the USDA and other reputable sources. This map here shows average annual rainfall by county and can be helpful when deciding if a plant will grow well in your area.
- Note that 1 inch of rainfall on 1 ft² is equivalent to 0.62 gallons of water, so you'll want ground covers that are fairly close to the range of rainfall your area is expected to get.

Native Landscaping

Landscaping with taller native plants will almost always be more beneficial to your local ecosystem than a lawn and it's often cheaper to establish than other ground covers.

Pros:

- Better for native insects. See the NWF Keystone species data.
- Better for native birds. See Audubon's Plants for Birds.
- Good value. Example: Prairie Moon's mix here is \$25 for 1000 ft². That means it's a little more expensive than micro-clover. However, when these plants are mature, most of them will produce copious amounts of seed. That seed is easy to collect and can be used to convert more areas. In my area, our local native plant gardening organization does seed collections and giveaways, so you might not even need to buy much seed if you join a local group.
- Great at absorbing storm water. You can google your location + "storm water" or "rain garden" and get lots of ideas for how to capture runoff. In wet climates, these are great for reducing the risk of flooding. In dry climates, these are great for retaining ground water and restoring aquifers.
- Native plants are adapted to your climate, so many of them are very hardy. A late-spring frost isn't going to bother most native plants in Michigan. Drought is something many native plants are accustomed to in Texas. Coastal natives are often tolerant of sea salt. Native species have evolved to tolerate the extremes of your location.
- Can look really pretty! Check out the Wild Ones Garden Designs for inspiration. Note that many of these designs include lawn areas for recreation. Your yard doesn't need to be all ornamental.

Cons:

- Most native plant spaces are not intended for recreation, so you won't be using a pocket prairie to play football.
- Native plant landscaping is not maintenance free. You will need to weed it occasionally. Almost everything in this list needs some kind of maintenance.

White Clover

White clover (Trifolium repens) / Dutch White Clover / lawn clover / micro clover

White clover is a common lawn plant that is sometimes included in grass seed, though it's less common to find it in modern mixes. Like many turf grasses, white clover is native to Europe.

Pros:

- It's cheap and widely available, similar to traditional turf grass.
- It's durable and quickly heals when damaged.
- Seeding it into an existing lawn is simple, just throw down some seed when you're expecting rain.
- Because it flowers earlier in spring than many other plants, white clover provides a food source to early-season generalist pollinators (though it won't replace native wildflowers).
- White clover needs a good deal of moisture to germinate from seed, but can be much more drought tolerant than turf grass once it is established. This can be a big improvement over traditional turf grasses in areas where watering is required.
- Like most legumes, it also absorbs nitrogen from the air in its root nodules and plant tissue. This nitrogen is fixed in the soil when the plant dies back (e.g. mowing or when it goes dormant in the winter) so it acts as a living fertilizer.

All of these features make white clover a great lawn plant.

Cons:

- The above ground growth of the plant will die back as temperatures dip below freezing, so it's not uncommon for muddy bare-patches to pop up in winter time. This isn't a huge issue when grown alongside turf grasses, but it means that mono culture *clover-only* lawns are not ideal in areas with cold winters.
- White clover is more drought tolerant than turf grass, but it's not suited to arid climates or prolonged drought. It needs 25-40 inches annual rainfall or supplemental watering (See <https://forages.oregonstate.edu/match> clover/species).
- Outside of its native range, **white clover is not a wildflower**. The positive impact it can have on your local ecosystem is way smaller than the benefits you'll see from native plants. It can still be a very useful lawn plant, but it's not a replacement for true native wildflowers.
- White clover is listed as an invasive species in some areas. Whether white clover ought to be considered invasive is controversial and still debated, so do your research on whether it's right for your area.
- U.S. States all have different approaches to tracking invasive species and noxious weeds. Many have a list of noxious weeds written into law, but often these are just a list of plants that are especially problematic to *agriculture*. Native species are often included in these lists.

- State wildlife departments also usually keep their own list of plants they consider invasive, even though they aren't officially listed by law. // // White clover is on those wildlife department noxious weed lists in a few states, but not in law.

Clover Cost Estimate

Type and Method	Rate per 1000 sqft	Price	Cost per 1000 sqft
Dutch White overseed	0.25 - 0.5 lbs	\$45 / 5 lbs	\$ 2.25
Dutch White lawn	1 - 2 lbs	\$45 / 5 lbs	\$ 9.00
Micro clover overseed	0.5 - 1 lbs	\$195 / 5 lbs	\$ 19.50
Micro clover lawn	1 - 2 lbs	\$195 / 5 lbs	\$ 39.00

Caution: The the rest of this wiki page is under construction. Wear a hard hat. ♂ ♀

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-- Native Turf Grasses and Sedge Lawns

There are many native grass and sedge species which can work well in a lawn setting. You might have some of them growing in your lawn currently. It's hard to make too many generalizations about all of these plants, but native lawns often require less mowing, less water, and are more adaptable to the conditions of the climate where they are native. // //

They also tend to be more expensive to install as a lawn / ground cover when compared to turf grasses, but this cost is often offset when considering water savings (location dependent). // //

-- Buffalo grass and Bouteloua species

The genus *Bouteloua* has several grasses which are often used as lawn alternatives. You can see the BONAP native range maps here. Of these, Buffalo Grass, Blue grama, and Side oats grama are some of the most widely available. Buffalo grass in particular is notable due to its short stature (12"). It also has a tendency to flop over, meaning you often don't need to mow it most of the year. Almost all lawns will require some amount of maintenance / weeding, but a buffalo grass lawn grown within its native range is about as close to a maintenance-free lawn as you can get. // //

[This guide](#) from Rainscaping Iowa talks about installation and maintenance of these native grass lawns.

Annual rainfall considerations: // //

- Buffalo Grass *Bouteloua dactyloides* 12 and 25 inches
- Blue grama *Bouteloua gracilis* 8 to 14 inches. Declines with more than 35 inches
- Side oats grama *Bouteloua curtipendula* 12 to 25 inches // //

Bouteloua Cost Estimate

Species over seed	Rate per 1000 ft ²	Price	Cost per 1000 sqft
Buffalo grass	1 lbs	\$56.50 / 1 lbs	\$ 56.50
Blue Grama	2 lbs	\$67.50 / 1 lbs	\$ 135

Species over seed	Rate per 1000 ft ²	Price	Cost per 1000 sqft
Side Oats Grama	1 lbs	\$30 / 1 lbs	\$ 30

Remember that there are associated savings when switching to some of these grasses - less watering, less mowing, etc. There's also potential disadvantages. If part of the lawn dies, you can't just go down to the hardware store and buy more of these grasses (in most cases). On the flip side, if you allow these grasses to grow to their mature size, they will readily self-seed.

Establishing these type of lawns with plugs is often cheaper / easier than with seed. We need to get some cost estimates for that.

-- Nimblewill

Nimblewill (*Muhlenbergia schreberi*) is a short grass native to much of North America. It's an interesting grass because it's a warm-season or "C4" grass that seems to have a distinct preference for part shade. For years nimblewill has been treated as a lawn weed, and many state extension offices still have articles written about how to manage

it: <https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/how-control-nimblewill-lawns> // //

But in recent years, many people are starting to talk about all of the benefits of this native turf-like grass. // //

Pros: // //

- Nimblewill is soft, fairly easy to grow, and it likes the damp shady spots where many turf grasses struggle.
- Spreads by rhizomes, similar to KBG and clover.
- Drought and clay tolerant
- Native to large areas of North America. // //

Cons:

- It's a warm-season grass which means it's still dormant in march when many cool season grasses are greening up. If your current lawn is seeded with warm season grasses already, that might not be an issue, but if your lawn is made of cool season grasses, this will be more noticeable.
- It's moderately durable but won't tolerate constant foot traffic. In a shady area, nimblewill will be more durable than most turf grasses, but not quite as durable as clover. This can be annoying if you live in a cold area where the clover will then die back in the winter and leave a muddy path where you walk frequently. // //

-- Yarrow

Coming soon // //

Pros // //

- Extremely drought tolerant
- spreads easily
- // // has soft but durable foliage

- flowers for pollinators if you let it get taller // //

Cons

- Can be poisonous to dogs and cats, so it's not a good option for people with pets
- Grows relatively quickly. It can get to be 3ft tall if it's left unmown; though some cultivars grow shorter and more slowly. // //

-- Self-heal / Heal-all Coming soon

Coming soon

-- Frog fruit (Phyla sp.) Coming soon

Coming Soon

-- Perennial Peanut Coming Soon

Coming Soon

-- Ragwort (Packera sp.) Coming soon

Coming Soon

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