

No Mow Grass

More home owners are looking for ways to spend less time and money on lawn maintenance. In the Midwest most home owners use a turf grass mix that contains bluegrass, fescue and rye. These mixes usually grow well in a wide variety of soil and shade/sun environments. The bluegrass mix usually requires supplemental water, fertilizers, and weed killers to produce a green, manicured appearance. Some homeowners are becoming concerned about the chemicals and water they need to apply to their lawns to achieve that look. A few homeowners have even installed artificial grass or paved over their lawns to avoid the work and chemicals! Others have replaced traditional bluegrass turf with native prairies, wildflowers or rock gardens.



A rock, gravel, and native plant yard in Hettinger, North Dakota.

At the Living Lab we are trying to demonstrate several alternatives to traditional turf. We do that because we want to avoid unnecessary lawn chemicals from entering the communities drinking water source (the Red River) and to conserve water. The first demonstration site of an alternative turf we installed is the buffalo and blue grama grass site next to the circle driveway. It was planted in 2004 and is doing well. This site offers another alternative. It's often referred to as a No mow mix but most alternative turfs have little or no mowing requirements. For example, our buffalo/blue grama site is usually mowed once a year.

No mow is a northern hardy mixture of fescues that turn brown in the fall and green in the spring at about the same time as bluegrass mixes. Fescues are “cool season” grasses. They are actively growing at temperatures between 60–75 degrees F. Fescues grow about 4–6 inches a year and do well in sun or medium shade. Most No mow lawns are mowed a couple of times a year but it is not necessary.

No mow mixes are made up of a blend of about six slow growing fescues. Creeping red, sheep, hard or tall fescues may be names of fescue that are familiar to you. All fescues share the same characteristics of shade and drought tolerance and stay green all year. Traditional turf mixes in this area will contain some fescues. The mix we used here contains: SR5100 Chewings, Azay sheep, SR3100 hard, scaldis hard, creeping red, and Dawson red fescues.

As with any turf grass establishment, preparation of the ground before planting is extremely important. In this case all the existing turf was killed before seeding. Excessive tilling was not used in order to minimize bringing weed seeds to the surface. Heavy clay soils, soil compaction, and wet soils are not conducive to establishing a fescue turf. In most cases an early fall planting time is best for establishing lawns. When establishing any new lawn it is important to water the seedlings. Once established, this type of turf will only need to be watered during prolonged drought periods. Fertilizer is not recommended for this mix. It is also recommended to minimize the use of pesticides. As with traditional turf, periodic de-thatching is recommended.

An internet search for no mow grass information will often turn up references to research on plant stature which involves “manipulating steroid pathways”. That research, while ‘interesting’ is NOT what was done here. We used commercially available seeds to install this turf.

Alternatives to traditional turf need to be researched by the lawn owner. Not all turfs will perform the way the homeowner desires. For example the buffalo/blue gamma site here at the Living Lab greens up later and goes dormant earlier than a traditional turf mix. Some alternative mixes do not hold up well to heavy traffic which may be found in a yard used by lots of children. Alternative yards rarely have the “groomed” look of a blue grass mix that is regularly mowed and fertilized. If an alternative yard will work—great, but make sure you know what you want and what you will get when making your landscaping plans.



No mow grass seed.