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Article Published June 28, 2018

## **Low-Mow Lawn: Less Maintenance, Lower Footprint**

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Crew-cut or mop-top? In the early 1960s, the Beatles stirred up a generational divide and instigated plenty of push-back from parents when their sons let their hair grow. Then the guardians of convention moved on, and men's hairstyles have never been the same.

Will it be the same for low-mow lawns, the mop-tops of the landscape world? I've never heard anyone call a such a lawn scandalous, but more than once I've been told that "the neighbors" wouldn't find the look acceptable. More than a few blight ordinances and homeowners' association rule books dictate grass heights below six inches.

The low-mow lawn, with its' soft, matted appearance, is not an abandoned landscape. It grows grass species and cultivars that are on a slower-than-usual track to flower and seed. The advantages are many, and the secret is out. More of these lawns are greening office parks, roadsides, and backyards than I've ever seen. And low-mow grass seed mixes have joined the selections on retail store shelves.

Low-mow lawns save time. They may be mowed once a month, or every six weeks, or only once annually. The recommended cutting height is usually four to six inches. By contrast, conventional lawns are mowed about once per week during the growing season or about 25 times per year in our area.

Low-mow lawns are water-savers. When we mow less frequently, the plants are less prone to water loss through the cut. Infrequent mowing also encourages deep root development. What is more, the species in these seed mixes are usually verified penny-pinchers when it comes to water. They have survived drought trials such as those administered by the Turfgrass Water Conservation Alliance ([www.tgwca.org](http://www.tgwca.org)) and the Alliance for Low Input Sustainable Turf ([www.a-listturf.org](http://www.a-listturf.org)).

Low-mow lawns give the atmosphere a break, too. Because of the infrequent appearance of mowers, trimmers, and leaf blowers, they create less pollution. Without so many engines, they are also quieter.

Fescue grasses dominate most of the low-mow mixes for our area. More shade-tolerant than the conventional lawn's Kentucky bluegrass, these fescue mixes are more versatile in our tree-friendly landscapes.

Low-mow fescue mixes are also capable of living in a wider range of soil pH than conventional lawn grasses. That means less lime.

Yes, these lawns have advantages. But they have limitations as well.

For instance, low-mow lawns don't fill the ecological niches served by flowering meadows or fields of native warm-season grasses. (Don't confuse low-mow lawn mixes with products labeled "conservation mix" or "meadow mix," which are likely to contain tall warm-season grasses.)

Most low-mow mixes contain "bunching" grasses, such as hard fescue, sheep's fescue, chewings fescue, and creeping red fescue. These lawns do not "knit" together into a solid carpet the same as lawns with a high percentage of Kentucky bluegrass.

Low-mow lawns usually require less weeding or herbicide, but—as the saying goes—weeds happen. I have personally worked with several such lawns that needed weeding during the first two years because of legacy weed seeds in the soil.

People sometimes ask if they can morph an existing lawn into a low-mow lawn with a bit of over-seeding. Unfortunately, that's not the best way. When we aim for a dense, healthy planting, it's valuable to remove all the old grass and weeds. Start from bare soil. Use sod-cutting, smothering, or one of the other ways to make way for a new mix. Use July and August to create the "blank slate." Then sow the new lawn after Sept. 1.

Low-mow seed mixes have been available to the professional market and through catalogs for about 20 years, but they are also sold in local garden centers these days. Some established brands are listed in the sidebar.

If you want to spend less time mowing, and reduce your earthly footprint, low-mow lawn mixes may be one answer.

Low-mow lawn suppliers and mixes:

Visit these websites to learn more about low-mow mixes for our region.

- American Meadows' Low Work and Water Mix, [www.AmericanMeadows.com](http://www.AmericanMeadows.com)
- Hart Seed: (S)low Mow: [www.hartseed.com](http://www.hartseed.com)
- Lavoie Horticulture Natives, Harmony Mix, [www.lavoiehorticulture natives.com](http://www.lavoiehorticulture natives.com)
- Pearl's Premium, [www.pearlspremium.com](http://www.pearlspremium.com)
- Prairie Nursery, No Mow Lawn, [www.prairienursery.com](http://www.prairienursery.com)
- Wildflower Farm, Eco-Lawn, [www.wildflowerfarm.com](http://www.wildflowerfarm.com)

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