

# Hands off the turf

Critics claim they're bad for the environment. But don't grub up your grass yet, says Lia Leendertz: an eco-friendly lawn is within your grasp

Lawns get a bad rap. The internet rings with calls to scrap lawns for the sake of the environment, and at the Hay Festival this year Carol Klein called them monocultures and urged us to grow moss and plants instead. They are biodiversity deserts, and consumers of vast amounts of energy, fertilisers and time.

But I like my lawn. It is both a visual breathing space and practical living area: you can't put a paddling pool in a gravel garden. I'm also not convinced they're so bad. They are a shocking export, that much is true. Lawn grasses like undramatic weather: mild and damp. Super-imposed on dry, parched landscapes they take lots of water and chemicals to keep green. In the UK, where we excel at climatic mediocrity, a neglected lawn will do OK.

Mindful of the environmental damage fossil fuel-driven mowers, chemical fertilisers and weedkiller can do, I have set about making my lawn greener than green. If you think creatively, it is possible to have an environmentally-friendly lawn.

## GET A PUSH MOWER

Using a push mower is a more aerobic experience, and I am convinced that if you have a small lawn it's easier and quicker than faffing with wires and extension leads or petrol. I'm such a fan I have two, one at home and one at the allotment. The allotment model, the fantastically named Qualcast Panther 30, is a classic and can be bought online for around £50. Of course, you can neatly sidestep peak oil worries by signing up for eco-electricity and using a Flymo,

and I do on the occasions I let the grass grow too long for the Panther, but it's not as nice a cut.

In response to renewed interest in push mowers, Fiskars has developed the all-singing, all-dancing Momentum, an ergonomically designed, to-the-edge mower. If you have a bad back and a little cash, it's looking like the future.

## SOW MICROCLOVER

In spring and summer the done thing in lawn-loving circles is to sprinkle a high-nitrogen fertiliser on to the grass to encourage strong, leafy growth. However, it is high-nitrogen fertilisers that cause me the most lawn-based eco angst, as their manufacture produces far more than its fair share of greenhouse gases. I've sown microclover instead. It fixes nitrogen from the air and feeds it back down to the roots of the grasses. You can buy this only as part of a grass seed mix (Johnsons Easy Lawn with Microclover), but now is the perfect time for oversowing bare patches anyway.

## DIY FERTILISER

Autumn lawn fertilisers are rich in root-promoting phosphorus and low in nitrogen. It's not a bad idea at all: roots keep growing throughout winter, and strong roots will hit spring more resilient to drought. But phosphorus is a finite resource that must be mined. Crucial to the world's food supply system and already running low, it seems not a little extravagant to sprinkle it on to our lawns.

Happily there is a renewable source of phosphates growing in



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your back garden. Well, there is in mine anyway. Dandelion roots are rich in phosphates. Dig some up and soak them in a bucket of water for a couple of weeks before watering on to your lawn.

## EMBRACE WEEDS

No weed gets out of hand if mown regularly, so use mowing as your weed control, rather than a potentially toxic weedkiller. Remember that weedkiller will kill your daisies, and what's the use of a lawn without daisies?

## LET IT GO BROWN

It hasn't been such a problem this summer, but in periods of hot weather lawns can turn brown, and it is tempting to turn the hose on them. But lawns go dormant in these situations, not dead. When rains come they turn green again. If you can stay your hosepipe when all about you is turning brown, your grass will be back. And if you can do all these things you will have a beautiful lawn that can hold its head high among the green roofs and the organic veg patches.

## BASIC LAWN CARE

**Scarify** Use a spring-tined rake to scratch out all the thatch (dead roots) and moss.

**Aerate** Push a fork into the soil as far as you can manage, give it a little wiggle, then remove. Do this at intervals of about a foot, brushing a sharp sand mixed with compost into the holes to keep them open.

**Overseed** Scratch up the surface with your rake to make a decent seed bed, then sow and cover with a little compost. Protect from birds.