Sparse turf, weedy grasses, and annual weeds were removed from this Laramie yard, creating additional growing space for vegetables, herbs, and flowers, along with a 90-square-foot area of fescue blend sod overseeded with white clover (pictured here). Photo by Amy Fluet.

Ready to tear out your turf and try something new?

Turfgrass can provide many benefits, including erosion control, noise reduction, cooling, water infiltration and filtering, and reduced runoff. However, in recent years, turfgrass has gotten a bad rap for being a bit of a water hog. Some folks also despise the mowing, fertilizing, weed eating, and moving hoses required to maintain turfgrass.

If that sounds familiar, you might want to consider an alternative. Depending on your situation, that might mean transforming turf into a lawn that requires less water and maintenance or creating a space that produces food for wildlife, pollinators, or people.

Replacing turf with rock

When people think about reducing maintenance, they sometimes turn to river rock and weed mat (or other barriers) as a solution, not realizing that maintaining a space with large rock can be very frustrating and time consuming.

There may be a time and place for weed mat, but in general, you're better off without it. Weed mat breaks down over time and, when it's used in conjunction with large rock, it makes little pockets that can fill with blown-in sand or dirt. Unfortunately, weeds often thrive in these small crevices.

2020: Turf right next to the wall was often weedy, dry, and difficult to maintain, so we transitioned to a flower bed. The initial bed was about 12 inches wide. Photo by Abby Perry.

May 2021: Expansion of the flower bed. We removed turf and added organic matter. Photo by Abby Perry.

June 2021: We kept the existing plants and slowly began adding additional plants, bulbs, and seed to help fill the space. Mulch was added for water holding capacity and to discourage weeds. Photo by Abby Perry.

While many homeowners end up disappointed with the aesthetics of river rock in the long run, rock isn't all bad. It's just important to match the rock to the growing situation.

Small pea gravel can be a good option for landscape beds where the rock will eventually be completely covered by plants. Pea gravel mixed with larger gravel can also provide a more natural look. In areas where rock is more visible, match desert or low-water plants to the space. If the plants placed in the rocks require consistent watering, weeds will also grow.

Be mindful that rocks and other hardscapes like concrete can also add a lot of extra heat to a space. This could be beneficial for winter months or for added fire protection, but may have unintended consequences, such as radiating too much heat under plants or against materials like vinyl siding.

Other options

What are some other options? It's becoming more and more popular to transition turf spaces into vegetable gardens or pollinator gardens. If planned correctly, pollinator gardens can also be deer resistant and more water efficient, a win-win-win.

Across the nation, alternative turf plants like clover and thyme have gained some traction. Although these options are successful in other climates, we don't know much about their success in Wyoming, especially in areas with harsh winds and long frigid winters. Carbon County Extension is currently conducting an alternative turf study to learn more.

Transitioning a small section at a time may be a good way to test an alternative plant's success without fully committing. However, remember that in Wyoming, weather can be highly variable from year to year.

Where to start

Whether you're transitioning your turf space to a garden, replacing it with river rock, or experimenting with alternative turf plants, getting started can be a little overwhelming.

Prepping the space is often the most important part and, in many cases, it can be helpful to make a

multi-year plan. Only tackle what you feel like you can handle this season.

If you're working toward a landscape (mostly perennials), the goal would be to create a more diverse space that requires a little bit of cleanup in the spring and fall, but minimal maintenance in between. It may take a couple years, but you'll get there.

Tearing out turf

Turfgrass is tough and resilient. If you don't want to be fighting grass in your beds for the rest of your days, make sure it's all gone from the start. Using a sod cutter can be a great way to repurpose turf for use in another location, but it often doesn't eliminate all the grass.

If applied appropriately and to the label specifications, herbicides can be an efficient option and one you don't have to repeat annually. Many herbicides are most effective when the turf is healthy and actively growing. Specialists who design these kinds of turf conversions recommend watering the grass to encourage growth, spraying the grass after it dries, waiting a couple of weeks for it to die, and then repeating the cycle if needed.

Turfgrass is persistent, so don't be surprised if it takes multiple rounds to completely eliminate the green grass. Before replanting, consult the herbicide label to make sure you understand when new plants can safely be added back to the treated area.

Unwanted grass can also be smothered out, though this takes longer than other methods and requires a fair amount of patience. The smothering approach involves watering the turf, then covering it with light-proof materials such as a black silage tarp or layers of cardboard (if using cardboard, cover the layers with mulch). No matter what material is used to cover the turf, it should be securely anchored to keep light out.

Make sure the smothered grass is fully dead before attempting to plant anything new. Depending on what you are planting in the area, you can either remove the dead turf before you plant or simply plant through it.

As you plant your former turf area, keep in mind that the plants will grow as they mature. Oftentimes if the plants fill the space in their first year, they'll outgrow it by year three and need to be removed. The long-term goals for the space should account for each plant's mature height and spread.

For help with planning a turf transition and selecting plants, contact your local UW Extension office. If you have questions about using herbicides to remove turf and when it's safe to plant back, contact your local weed and pest office.

Turf transformation is one of **Abby Perry's** superpowers (though right now she's more interested in renovating her raspberry patch). A UW Extension educator based in Rawlins, she is a co-coordinator of this magazine and can be reached at ajacks12@uwyo.edu or (307) 328-2642.

Is turfgrass truly a "water hog"?

The recommended rate for watering turfgrass is 1 to 2 inches per week. For sprinklers commonly available for consumer purchase, 1 hour is close to being equivalent to 1 inch. To determine how long it takes to achieve 1 inch per week in your system, visit https://bit.ly/uwe-water-lawn and follow the instructions in the video.

Turfgrass can also be trained, though it may look worse before it looks better. In general, deep and less frequent watering promotes deeper root growth and overall resilience. Be aware that increasing the time between waterings may induce signs of stress (wilting in the mornings or yellowing) at first. Turf yards adjusted to these conditions can easily endure 10+ days without being watered.

However, soil type and air temperatures do affect turf success. Improving soil conditions can improve turf health and reduce the need for lawn maintenance and watering. Aerating, dethatching, topdressing with compost, proper mowing, and overseeding are all ways to promote lawn health.

Note that some grasses more readily tolerate dry, high-altitude environments common in Wyoming. Visit https://bit.ly/bb-bluegrasses to learn more.