



Clover and turf “buddy” growing together in a Wyoming lawn. Photo by Micah Most.

# Should you move over to clover (or another lawn alternative)?

**A**lternative turf types have been a topic of conversation for years, especially in climates with erratic precipitation and hot, dry, windy summers. Many homeowners and landowners seek vegetation cover to combat weed growth (funny how the weeds love drought and searing temperatures!), provide a play surface, and keep soil in place.

One option, clover, has received a lot of attention. The most common is Dutch white clover (*Trifolium*

*repens*), but red clover and microclover may also pop up in online searches. Clover may seem like a perfect alternative to turf—clover plants are low growing, fix nitrogen (so they never need nitrogen fertilization), and provide flowers for pollinators. However, like any vegetative cover, clover comes with pros and cons.

## Benefits and characteristics

As a plant, clover is interesting and useful. First, it’s a legume, so it naturally fixes (produces) nitrogen through bacteria in its roots. Just like green beans, soybeans, and honeylocust trees, clover can support itself with its own nitrogen production and also shares nitrogen with neighboring plants.

Because it’s a blooming plant, clover attracts pollinators and provides nectar for bees, butterflies, and moths. The plant stays fairly compact—Dutch white clover may reach a height of 6–7 inches tall, while microclover may stay more dwarf (3 inches when mowed and 3–6 inches if not mowed), but that largely depends on how much water is provided. Clover can tolerate some mowing and foot traffic.

## A brief history of clover

In the early half of the 1900s (starting in the 1930s), clover seed was often included in turf seed mixes, until herbicides became more mainstream in landscape management. Once recognized as a common plant, clover was labeled a “weed” as the focus shifted to encouraging uniform stands of grass. Older lawns often have clover coexisting with grass—as do many yards in Europe.



White Dutch clover growing among turf species at Hot Springs State Park.  
Photo by Abby Perry.

## Potential challenges

Clover isn't without challenges. Unfortunately, it's not as drought tolerant as some make it out to be—it's estimated that clover may have similar (or slightly lower) water-use rates as Kentucky bluegrass. Researchers at Colorado State University are working to determine a more definitive water-use requirement. Like houseplants, clover will give many signs that it's in need of water, such as yellowing and wilted leaves.

Establishing a monoculture of clover can be a challenge. Clover seems to do best when growing with a plant "buddy," which is why it was included in grass seed mixes. If you add clover to your lawn, be aware that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to control pesky broadleaf plants (e.g., thistles, bindweed, and kochia) using herbicides since clover is also a broadleaf.

Clover can be an expensive investment—anywhere from \$4 to \$8 per pound. Seeding rates to incorporate it into an existing lawn are 1 to 2 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Microclover is even more expensive at \$20 to \$30 per pound.

When planting clover, keep in mind that it can creep via stolons (runners) and can also seed. Mowing it to remove flowers can help prevent seeding, but clover can still sometimes end up in spots that you don't want it.

## Seeding clover

If you're incorporating clover into an existing lawn, the best way to include it is to aerate the lawn (making lots and lots and lots of holes) and then use a drop-type fertilizer spreader to apply the seed.

First, open the mouth of the spreader just wide enough to let some seed fall out. Then, gently rake to work the clover seeds into the aeration holes and water (or let nature water for you, if the season provides). Clover seed won't germinate quickly in cold soils, so seeding in spring will take longer. Water to keep the seeds moist, but not soggy.

Maintain the rest of the lawn or area as you normally would. If you're overseeding into a lawn, keep mowing.

## Is clover a good fit for my situation?

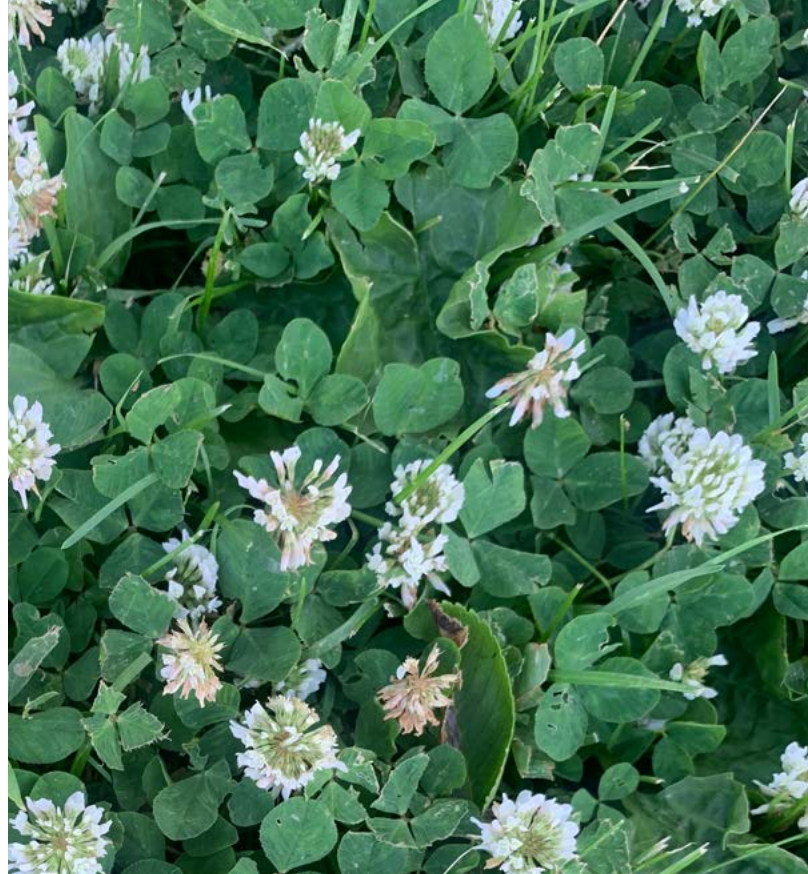
So, is clover a good choice for Wyoming lawns? That depends on your end goals. If your goal is to save water, it's probably not the best choice. Clover also wouldn't

be a great option for the “back 40”—it requires more maintenance (and water) than those areas generally receive. It also prefers at least a half day of sun each day.

If you have three large dogs and daily soccer games, clover probably can’t withstand the foot traffic. Plus, deer and rabbits find it tasty. But can clover be seeded into existing lawns? Absolutely.

Clover, like all plants, has its pros and cons—unfortunately, the perfect groundcover plant for every situation doesn’t exist. If considering clover, do your homework and assess your situation. Before purchasing seed or planting, reach out to your local extension office and talk to seed suppliers to discuss what might be best for your landscape.

.....  
**Alison O'Connor** is a professor of horticulture for Colorado State University Extension in Larimer County. Contact her at [astoven@larimer.org](mailto:astoven@larimer.org) with questions about clover and other alternative turf options.



White Dutch clover in a residential yard in Carbon County. Photo by Abby Perry.

# BARNYARDS & BACKYARDS

## 1 YEAR FOR ONLY \$13!

Subscribe online at <https://bit.ly/barnyards-subscribe>.

Or, mail a check with this order form to Ag Resource Center, 1000 E. University Ave., Dept. 3354, Laramie, WY 82071.

**BILL TO**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City, State Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email \_\_\_\_\_

**SHIP TO** (if different from billing address)

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City, State Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about *Barnyards & Backyards*? \_\_\_\_\_

Email [barnyardsbackyards@uwyo.edu](mailto:barnyardsbackyards@uwyo.edu) for other subscription information.