

More on the Lawn Debate

Chris Larkin

From the February 2004 issue of the Study Group Newsletter.

Do we need lawns in suburbia?

I will make a couple of comments to start with. It certainly is possible to have an Australian grass lawn. There are two gardens close to Melbourne that provide good examples. Blake's garden in Ringwood East has a very large lawn comprising predominantly *Microlaena stipiodes*. The three times I've visited it has been neatly mown looking for all the world like a healthy exotic lawn. Does their lawn sometimes have a tufting look from being left uncut? I don't know but certainly the wallaby grass section of Jane Burke's garden in Sorrento is deliberately left to flower for effect. I've not seen it in flower myself but I have heard it makes a glorious sight.

The second observation I'd like to make concerns the idea that children need a lawn 'to kick the footy around'. A few years ago I made a special point to ask a couple of children visiting Snape's garden how they had liked it. (Diana and Brian's garden doesn't have a lawn.). They said they loved it. To which I replied - but aren't you concerned that there's no lawn to play on? "No", they said, "this garden is lots of fun with different places to explore and if we wanted to kick a footy we could do that in a park". Two young boys who visited my garden recently (which also has no lawn area), told their mother on the way home that they just wanted to take the whole garden home with them. I know some readers are going to say who's got time to take children to a park, or is it safe for children to be unaccompanied at a park, or not everyone has a park close by. But I'd like to side step all this by asking questions like the following. How often is the footy kicked around the backyard? Is kicking the footy around the backyard more valuable play than what is possible in an entirely different style of garden?

In my case eliminating 'lawn' has been a gradual process for half the garden. (The other half of the garden went from being a complete mess to a designed space with no lawn.) The garden up behind the house has been developed in stages to replace most of what was once a mown grass hillside. As I expanded the garden on and up the hill I established garden beds with grass pathways opening to larger grassed areas. When the grass was green and neatly mown the garden beds were nicely defined but I'm afraid this never ever made up for the dry dead look in summer which I personally don't like. For years I wanted to eliminate the grass - not an issue for the paths themselves - but how would I be able to maintain the feeling of space in those open grassy areas? It took a long time - visiting friends' gardens to get ideas, thinking and discussing possibilities - before I could solve this problem.

Solving open space treatment was at the heart of my difficulty in eliminating 'the lawn'. And maintaining open space is an important element in any garden. Paths and areas that are paved, graveled or mulched are one way it is achieved. Ponds too provide this effect. Planting solutions are possible too by using ground covers such as *Myoporum parvifolium*, *Pultenaea pedunculata*, *Brachyscome multifida* selections, *Helychrysums ramossisima*, *Grevillea lanigera* prostrate, *Correa reflexa* var. *numularifolia*, *Scaevola* 'Mauve Clusters'. If you combine appropriate plants a tapestry effect is also possible. The addition of tufting plants like *Orthrosanthus laxus* or *O.multiflora*, *Thelionema caespitosum*, or low growing lomandras can also add interest without closing in the space. All the plants I've mentioned so far, apart from the tuftys, grow quite flat to the ground but open space will still be maintained with plants that have some height, say under 0.5m unless they are grown down a slope in which case the gradient of the slope will determine the acceptable height. If you want to be able to walk on the plants then you could also try using low growing Australian grasses or *Pratia* or *Dichondra repens* but be warned these last two can become quite invasive if they are given the right conditions. When I tried to grow *Dichondra* as a single ground cover over a reasonably large area it left gaps for weeds to grow in and went on a march into my garden where the mulched beds were much more to its liking. Once there it out-competed small plants like *Hibbertia obtusifolia* and became quite a management problem.

So yes I think there are various interesting, beautiful, restful ways to replace lawn but I suspect what has to be challenged first is the concept many of us have of gardens being largely border gardens. This after all is still the prevailing garden style evident as we take a drive through any suburb.