

Flora of the Lawn

By Molly Hacker



Photos by Orbis staff

Outdoor spaces are important for our health and well-being. They hold aesthetic value and provide us with space for recreation and respite, which can enhance physical and psychological well-being. For many people, a yard space is the only slice of nature they experience.

We manage our outdoor spaces according to the values we hold, encouraging plants we value, and discouraging those we do not. Some use their outdoor space to grow food gardens, lush green lawns or showy ornamentals, while others showcase the indigenous plants of the region and create wildlife habitat. Many people maintain multi-use spaces and partition areas with different plant types. Measured by surface area, it seems that the most valued plant assemblage in urban and suburban areas is the classic turf lawn. The “ideal” lawn contains one grass species (generally referred to as “turf grass”) and few if any “weeds” (everything else). In the lawn, we spend a lot of time, energy and money to care for the turf grass and discourage other plants. But, what is a turf grass anyway? And what are all those “weeds”?

To answer these questions, I examined species composition of lawns across four central midwestern states. Each lawn contained the usual non-native turf grass species including Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*) and tall fescue (*Schedonorus arundinaceus*), and had a similar suite of “weeds,” including clover (*Trifolium* species), common blue violet (*Viola sororia*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), creeping Charlie (*Glechoma hederacea*) and plantain (*Plantago* species).

Because the lawn is not a naturally occurring plant community, to maintain one requires significant time and resources. A uniform lawn of turf is nice for kicking a sport ball around, but a lawn with space for other plants can also provide habitat for the pollinators that help grow the food we enjoy but are threatened by habitat loss and climate change. By using native plants in our lawns we can also reduce our use of water, fertilizer, herbicide, and help shrink our carbon footprint. This can help us spend less time working on the lawn and more time enjoying it.

You can begin by thinking about how you use the space in your lawn and perhaps re-evaluating your position on lawn-care maintenance. Seek out the nurseries in your region to find the best native plant material. In the meantime, check out this fun field guide to the plant species you might find already growing in your own lawn.



Common grasses of the lawn



Poa pratensis
Kentucky bluegrass
Non-native
native to Europe and north Asia



Lolium perenne
Perennial ryegrass
Non-native
native to Europe, Asia and northern
Africa



Schedonorus arundinaceus
Tall fescue
Non-native
Native to Europe



Festuca rubra
Red fescue
Some varieties native to US,
native to Europe, Asia and
northern Africa

The “Ideal Lawn”:
St. Louis

Schedonorus arundinaceus
(tall fescue)

Poa sp. (bluegrass)



Poa sp. (bluegrass, likely *P. pratensis* or *P. trivialis*) bottom left;
Schedonorus arundinaceus (tall fescue), bottom right.

Amelia's lawn
Columbus, OH

Trifolium repens
(white clover)

Schedonorus arundinaceus
(tall fescue)

Cyperaceae: likely *Carex*
blanda

Glechoma hederacea
(creeping Charlie)

Taraxacum officinale
(dandelion)

Viola sp.
(likely *V. sororia*, common
blue violet)



Megan's lawn
Indianapolis, IN

Viola sp.
(likely *V. sororia*, common
blue violet)

Duchesnea indica
(Indian strawberry)

Unidentifialbe grass,
potentially *Digitaria* sp.

Acer sp. (maple)



Carex jamesii
(James' sedge)

Oxalis sp.
(woodsorrel)

Symphyotrichum cordifolium
(heart-leaved aster)

Muhlenbergia schreberi
(nimblewill)

Veronica sp.
(neckweed)



Old lawn: Tower Grove Park
St. Louis, MO

Unidentifiable forb

Lepidium sp.
(pepperweed)

Oxalis sp. (woodsorrel)

Acer sp. (maple)

Acalypha sp. (three-seeded Mercury)

Unidentified grass

Trifolium sp., (likely *T. pretense*, red clover, red inflorescences spotted nearby!)



Viola sp.
(likely *V. sororia*, common blue violet)

Plantago sp. (likely *P. major*, broadleaf plantain)

Persicaria longiseta
(creeping smartweed)

Ambrosia artemisiifolia
(common ragweed)



Jeremy's lawn
Plymouth, IN

Poa pratensis (Kentucky
bluegrass (the thin-blade
grass))

Schedonorus arundinaceus
(tall fescue, the wide-
blade grass)

Plantago lanceolata
(narrowleaf plantain)

Trifolium repens
(white clover)

Glechoma hederacea
(creeping Charlie)





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