

September, 2011

Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia Brian ... continued from page D5



A close up of moss, a soft rug for small, damp areas.

If you've had a difficult time growing anything in your yard, get your soil tested and contact the University of California Extension office for advice. Once the site is level, the soil has been tilled and enriched, you are ready to scatter your seed or roll out the sod. If you have a small area to beautify, throwing seed covered in peat moss may be the best decision. I recommend netting the square to keep the hungry birds away from this dining buffet.

Most homeowners in Lamorinda demand instant beauty. If this describes you, sod is your answer. Although more costly initially, sod provides a thick, durable surface with immediate satisfaction. Think of sod as a yard of turf in box that rolls like a carpet into any space you wish. A sod combination of perennial rye grass mixed with pureblue grass provides a glossy green finish. Before you install sod, check out neighborhood lawns that you like. Be brave and ask the name of the variety of grass and the growing experience, then purchase the same type. Abide by the installation instructions, including specifications for watering, feeding, and mowing.

In general, lawns require more water than perennial gardens, including at least two fertilizations per year, in the spring and autumn, weekly mowing in the warm season, and occasional

de-thatching and aerating as needed. For strong root development, water in the morning, deeply and infrequently. My trick for a healthy lawn is to mulch with the lawn clippings by eliminating the catch bag while mowing plus raise the blade on the mower an inch higher. The longer grass keeps the roots cooler while the lawn clippings put nitrogen back into the soil. A daily weed-pulling trek around the perimeter deters the invasives. Although my husband disagrees with me, I enjoy infiltrating our lawn with the delicate, yet hardy isotoma blue star creeper for a splash of surprise. If your garden is extremely shady and wet, you may want to plant a patch of baby tears.

A popular alternative to the mow hungry traditional lawns is ornamental grass, such as silver blue fescue. These "almost maintenance free" grasses are available in a variety of heights, colors, and textures. They are especially useful on hillsides for erosion control and in places where minimal water is available. Lambs ears, dichondria, ajuga, and other ground covers can also be used in shadier areas where mowing is difficult. Iceplant has been used in dry areas, although I find it attractive only when it is flowering in the spring.

Gravel lawns are becoming increasingly popular. With our California outdoor lifestyle, gardeners who want to preserve water and spend minimal hours tending turf have begun installing floors of pea gravel or crushed stone. If this is your environmental choice, the depth of the gravel is critical. If it is laid too deep, you'll feel as though you are trudging through snow. Create a base layer of stones that are one or two inches in length, flatten with a compactor, then add two or three inches of crushed gravel or pea gravel on top for a very stable surface that drains well and weed free. If you are a bit artistic, allow volunteer plants such as verbena or silver spires of *Verbascum* to sprout for visual interest. Add a fountain or water feature, border the gravel carpet with large boulders, and beds of lavender, succulents, agaves, sunflowers, and native grasses. For a Southwestern look, throw in an old wagon wheel or rusty water pump to accessorize.

Outside my Starstyle® Studio, I have a bed of lush green moss under the redwood tree amid the rhododendrons and azaleas. On a hot day the soft coolness of the moss offers a refreshing

respite while conducting a consultation on the bench outside my office. Irish moss, Scotch moss, and creeping thyme can be lovely natural rugs in small patches.

Unless you plan on being a slave to your lawn, hiring a service, or paying exorbitant amounts for water and maintenance, don't compare your turf to the local golf course. It will never measure up. Perfectionists do not noble lawn caretakers make! But if you are a lawn ranger like me and ready to run through the sprinklers, put up with a few brown spots, and pull the occasional weed, your lawn will provide priceless life memories long after the expenses are forgotten.

Here's to cartwheels, sow bugs, hoses, and running barefoot through the grass. Long live lawns!



A sea of waving silver tipped ornamental grasses graces the hillside with watermelon crepe myrtle and the pink puffs of the Silk Tree in the background.



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Lamorinda Foreclosures recorded

LAFAYETTE

Camino Colorados, Citibank, 07-27-11, \$596,250, 1678 sf, 4 bd

Martino Road, Bradford Communities, 08-01-11, \$772,018, 2800 sf, 3 bd

Springhill Road, Magnate Fund 2, 08-04-11, \$595,000, 3398 sf, 4 bd

MORAGA

Ascot Drive, Harborview Mortgage, 07-13-11, \$190,755, 1068 sf, 2 bd

Donald Drive, Just Properties, 07-28-11, \$87,251, 560 sf, 1 bd