**Turf for low maintenance: prof’s calculations say so**

“Contrary to what many people think, getting rid of mowed grass and replacing it with groundcovers, mulches and wildflowers will not reduce landscape maintenance,” reports Dr. Don Williams of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. “My extensive studies document that mowed grass does not deserve its ‘high maintenance’ label and, in fact, other forms of groundcover will almost always require more maintenance than lawns.”

To calculate actual time and cost comparisons, Dr. Williams conducted a number of site-specific experiments, including one in which he timed students as they hand-weeded a 6,600 sq. ft. English ivy bed. His results showed that one weeding required more time than it would take to mow the same area 20 times a year for 60 years.

Using his “maintenance time per unit hour” calculation method, Dr. Williams reports that at the low end of the productivity scale, one 19-inch push mower will cut 7 sq. ft. of turf per second while a 60-inch commercial mower would cover 30 sq. ft./second and highway rights-of-way mowers move at 70 sq. ft./sec.

Thus, a one-acre park could be cut in less than half an hour with a 60-inch mower while 100 acres of roadside would take 17.28 hours to mow with a large, tractor-powered unit. Even if mowers only work at half efficiency, they mow 1 sq. ft./sec. over the course of a year.

“What other type of landscape maintenance can be done at one second per square foot per year?” he asks.

Williams also determined that using geotextiles and mulch would cost more than $11,500 an acre for materials and labor. However, investing that $11,500 in the bank at 6 percent interest would yield $690 per year—more than enough to pay for 18 contracted mowings a year at $38 per mowing.

“When it comes to low maintenance, lawns are hard to beat,” the Tennessee turf prof concludes.