

LAWN/TREE CARE

35-mph grass

How one landscape company uses ecolawns as part of its mix. *By SARAH PFLEDDERER*

Envision a lawn that needs to be mowed only a couple times a year. Your customers are likely ecstatic about the reduction of landscaping costs and so much so you make up the slump in revenue from new work, per their referrals.

Sound too good to be true? It is.

But this was the overrated notion for ecological lawns, aka ecolawns, when they came about 20 years ago as the brainchild of Tom Cook, an associate professor of horticulture at Oregon State University.

The majority clover-covered turfgrass that required nearly nil maintenance was to be a sustainable substitute for traditional lawns recalls Bob Grover, president of

Pacific Landscape Management in Hillsboro, Ore. But after going untouched for more than a month, the lawns would look like an ugly field once mowed.

Due to sustainability interests from commercial clients, Pacific Landscape Management bounced back the ecolawn concept five years ago.

Since then it has installed and maintained about a dozen ecolawns, which it markets as EcoLawns, and has seen a threefold advantage to them versus traditional turf:

- › 50 percent less mowing.
- › 100 percent less fertilization.
- › 30 percent less irrigation.

SUITABLE SETTINGS

Ecolawns are not “front-door grass,” Grover says. In fact, they’re most suitable in spaces that receive few visitors passing close by.

A more fitting description, he says, is “35-mph grass.” “It’s green and you glance at it as you’re driving by. But if you walk on it, it may not look as great every day as a fine-cut lawn,” Grover says. “If you’re using it at the right place and you give it enough maintenance, we’ve had some good success.”

Grover says an ecolawn fares best in locations with little foot traffic because passersby can’t tell from afar the turf is mostly comprised of clover. Moreover, clover attracts bees when it blooms, making ecolawns a risky substitute for a backyard, school or athletic field where people could get stung.



Bob Grover, president of Pacific Landscape Management

“It’s green and you glance at it as you’re driving by.”

—Bob Grover

This type of turf, though, is able to grow in any area traditional lawns grow, Grover says.

“I think it would be possible to grow this in all regions of the country,” he says. “If you really want to be ecological, it’d be a great option.”

THE LOGISTICS

Ecolawns are comprised of a dwarf grass, herbaceous plant and clover seed mixture. Pacific Landscape Management purchases its mixture from Oregon suppliers Hobbs & Hopkins, Sunmark Seeds and Nichols Garden Nursery.

Clover is the key ingredient to the lawn’s sustainability, given it is drought tolerant—although not 100 percent—and it nitrifies the soil, thus naturally and fully fertilizing the lawn.

PHOTOS: PACIFIC LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT



Ecolawns are comprised of a dwarf grass, herbaceous plant and clover seed mix. Bob Grover says they're best suited for "drive-by" areas.

As far as controlling broadleaf weeds like dandelions, Pacific Landscape Management occasionally will do spot herbicide treatments, Grover says.

When implementing EcoLawns for customers, the company has grown them from scratch, but more commonly it converts existing lawns by overseeding. It charges about 50 cents per square foot for installations and the turf can take up to a year to be fully established.

Regular mowing, Grover says, is most important in maintaining the lawn. He suggests mowing no more than every other week in a growing season, which cuts maintenance needs for clients by about half.

Grover, who calls ecolawns a "necessary evil piece of landscaping," says it can be difficult for some customers to swallow the idea of willingly letting a weed govern their lawn.

"It's a different thought process and theory," he says. "We don't have people beating our door to say, 'Please convert my lawn.'"

Yet, to an extent, that's OK with him. "It's a great way to help your customer out," he says. "But if I did that on all the lawns I maintain, I would probably cut my revenue by 20 percent."

To strike a balance Grover floats the option of EcoLawns to customers, but doesn't actively market them. The idea,

he says, is to stay ahead of his competition with "cutting-edge" offerings.

"Ecological or otherwise, we really don't want to be left behind because somebody else is offering something we aren't," he says. "If this is something our customers are interested in, we don't want to be left behind."

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