UF | IFAS Extension
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

Hort-18

# Landscape Recommendations for Sustainable Development: Turf Alternatives

**Terra Freeman**
**Florida Friendly Landscaping™ and Commercial Horticulture Agent III**
**UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County**

This publication is designed to support builders, developers, commercial horticulture professionals, homeowner associations (HOA), community development districts (CDD), property managers, and new homeowners. It offers practical, research-based guidance on selecting, planting, and maintaining a Florida-friendly Landscape.

Florida-friendly landscaping™ (FFL) educates Floridians about environmentally sustainable landscaping practices that conserve water and protect water quality while maintaining an attractive landscape utilizing the following nine principles:

- Right Plant, Right Place
- Water Efficiently
- Fertilize Appropriately
- Reduce Stormwater Runoff
- Manage Yard Pests Responsibly
- Provide for Wildlife
- Mulch
- Recycle Yard Waste
- Protect the Waterfront

*Blue-eyed grass*
*https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/ornamentals/blue-eyed-grass/*

Conventional landscapes are often comprised mostly of turfgrass, however these turf areas may require regular irrigation, fertilizer, and pest and disease management. Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ supports functional turfgrass, such as areas for children, pets, and recreation where it can tolerate foot traffic better than most groundcovers. In areas where turf isn't needed, consider low-growing groundcovers or other suitable plants that offer similar visual continuity with less maintenance. Many aesthetic qualities associated with turf can be achieved through strategic use of groundcovers, helping create landscapes that balance turf with other plantings while supporting long-term resilience and resource efficiency.

Fortunately, many options are available to replace non-functional turf. Popular single-species alternatives, such as frog fruit or perennial peanut, can provide attractive, low-maintenance groundcover. The key is to assess the conditions of the landscape and select plant species that are naturally suited to those conditions. For example, in dry, sunny locations, select species that thrive in those conditions to minimize the need for supplemental irrigation once established.

An Equal Opportunity Institution

**Mixed-Species, Mowable Lawns**

Another effective alternative to a traditional turfgrass lawn, and an excellent solution for problem areas in the landscape where turf does not thrive, is a mixed-species, mowable landscape. Compared to conventional turf, these diverse plantings require significantly fewer inputs and far less ongoing maintenance. Once established, mixed-species lawns can often rely on rainfall alone, greatly reducing irrigation needs. Fertilizer inputs are minimal or even unnecessary, which helps limit nutrient runoff and leaching. In addition, several low-growing, mowable species naturally fix atmospheric nitrogen, further decreasing the need for supplemental fertilization. Greater diversity reduces the likelihood of pest outbreaks commonly associated with monoculture lawns, while enhancing overall landscape health and stability. Increasing plant diversity within a lawn also supports beneficial insects and pollinators, creating a more sustainable and ecologically resilient landscape.

**The following plants are well suited for sunny locations:**

- Lyre-leaved sage/ *Salvia lyrata*
- Tickseed/*Coreopsis lanceolata*
- Creeping Sage/ *Salvia misella*
- Twinflower/ *Dyschoriste oblongifolia*
- Sunshine Mimosa*/ Mimosa strigilosa*
- Frog Fruit*/ Phylla nodiflora*
- Blue Eyed Grass / *Sisyrinchium angustifolium*
- Yellow Purslane / *Portulaca oleracea*
- White Clover / *Trifolium repens*
- Golden Creeper*/Ernodea littoralis*

Photo: https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/browardco/2023/05/11/the- time-for-mixed-mowable-species-has-come/

**These are well-suited for shady locations:**

For shaded areas, low-growing groundcovers can serve as effective lawn alternatives. These species tolerate regular mowing while maintaining a green, lawn-like appearance.

- Lyre-leaved sage, *Salvia lyrata*
- Creeping Sage, *Salvia misella*
- Frogfruit, *Phyla nodiflora*
- Violas / *Viola*
- Basketgrass, *Oplismenus setarius*

**Establishment of mixed-species lawns**

Mixed-species lawns can be established either by planting directly into an existing base of bahiagrass or by starting with a clean slate of soil. Before planting, remove any weeds or unwanted vegetation. Amending the soil with compost will improve its overall texture as well as its ability to retain moisture and nutrients. Begin by planting a base species—such as bahiagrass, frog fruit, or sunshine mimosa—then introduce additional species like lyre-leaved sage, tickseed coreopsis, and creeping sage. Depending on the species, plant material may be installed as plugs, quart-sized pots, or sod; perennial peanut, for example, is available as sod. Space plants based on their mature size, or place them closer together for quicker ground coverage.

Newly planted lawns require consistent irrigation until root systems have fully established. After establishment, irrigation needs should be assessed seasonally. Supplemental water should only be applied when plants show clear signs of drought stress, such as wilting that does not recover in the evening, inward leaf curling, or a lack of resilience after foot traffic.

**Management of mixed-species lawns**

Management of mixed-species lawns should follow the natural life cycles of the plants. Most species bloom in spring and then set seed, and the seedheads require time to ripen before the seeds become viable. For this reason, mowing is delayed until the life cycle is complete. Once mature, plants naturally release their seeds into the soil, replenishing the seed bank and helping the lawn become denser over time. To support this process, mowing should be avoided from January through early May.

Set your mower blade to its highest setting to allow the plants to bloom and to support healthier root systems. The exact height will depend on the species planted and the desired aesthetic. A mixed species lawn can provide pollen, nectar, and seeds for pollinators and beneficial insects, so it is important to consider these ecological benefits when deciding frequency and height of mowing.

## Plants for Turf Alternatives

The following plants perform well as alternatives to turf. They can be grown individually or combined together to create a mixed-species lawn, and all are mowable. For best results, plan for dedicated pathways for high traffic areas of the landscape.

*Photo:https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/nassauco/2019/08/22/match weed-or-frogfruit/*

**Frog Fruit, *Phyla nodiflora***
Native
Drought and flood tolerant
Mowable
Small purple and white flowers
May go semi-dormant in the winter
Slow to establish
Butterfly host plant

**Sunshine Mimosa, *Mimosa strigillosa***
Native
Mowable
Pink powderpuff flowers
May reduce growth and go dormant in the winter
It spreads
Fixes nitrogen
Butterfly host plant

*Photo: https://plant-directory.ifas.ufl.edu/plant-directory/mimosa-strigillosa/*

*Photo credit: Carrie Stevenson, UF/IFAS Extension*

**Perennial Peanut, *Arachis glabrata***
Cultivars: 'Ecoturf', 'Arblick', 'Florigraze'
Not native
Mowable
Yellow edible pea flowers
May reduce growth, freeze back, or go dormant in the winter
Fixes nitrogen and requires little fertilizer
Not a butterfly host plant

**Basketgrass, *Oplismenus setarius***
Native
Mowable
Inconspicuous flowers
Can withstand foot traffic
Grows in deep shade
Deciduous- Goes completely dormant in the winter
Butterfly host plant

*Photo credit: Anne Yasalonis, UF/IFAS Extension*

**Twinflower, *Dyschoriste oblongifolia***
Native
1.2 – 1 ft tall by 1-1.5 ft wide
Mow at the highest height
Purple flowers
Evergreen
Butterfly host plant

*Photo: https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/butterflies/browse/Details/136*

**Creeping Sage,** *Salvia misella*
Native
Moist to dry, well-drained soils
Shade to full sun
Blue flowers, fragrant
6 inch tall rosettes with spread up to 3ft wide
Deciduous

*Photo: Atlas of Florida Plants, Institute for Systematic Botany, USF*

*Photo: https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/leeco/2022/04/05/uncommon-edible-landscape-plants/*

**Lyre-leaved Sage,** *Salvia lyrata*
Native
Deciduous perennial
Tolerates drought and flooding
Mowable
½ ft tall by 3-5 ft wide
Full sun to shade
Blue flowers, fragrant

*Photo credit: Mary Salinas, UF/IFAS Extension*

*Photo credit: Mary Salinas, UF/IFAS Extension*

*Photo credit: Eleanor Dietrich; https://www.flawildflowers.org/flower-friday-coreopsis-lanceolata/*

**Lanceleaf Coreopsis,** *Coreopsis lanceolata*
Native
Perennial
Semi-evergreen
12 to 24 inches tall by 12 to 24 inches wide
Full sun to part sun
Soil: acid to alkaline; clay; sand; loam

**Benefits of turf alternatives**
Whether composed of a single species, such as perennial peanut, or a mixture of several low-growing plants, an alternative lawn very often requires far fewer inputs over time than turfgrass. It conserves water, reduces pesticide use, improves soil health, and supports pollinators. In addition to these ecological benefits, alternative lawns offer an effective solution for areas where conventional turfgrass struggles to thrive.

**References:**

https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/orangeco/2021/06/11/low-maintenance-florida-friendly-alternatives-to-turfgrass-lawns/

https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/browardco/2023/05/11/the-time-for-mixed-mowable-species-has-come/

https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/sarasotaco/2023/10/05/embracing-lawn-ornaments-a-starter-guide/

https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/hillsboroughco/2024/05/21/florida-native-groundcovers-for-shade

**Feb 2026**

An Equal Opportunity Institution