



The new lawn

The great British lawn is changing, with manicured grass giving way to less formal, more naturally planted gardens

REPORT **JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR**

There is a brief scene in the great masterpiece *Asterix in Britain* in which a stereotypical Englishman (trimmed moustache and neatly tailored tweeds) is putting the finishing touches to an immaculate lawn with a miniature sickle. This is a snapshot of everything we expect from a perfect lawn: an expanse of emerald green unblemished by weed or molehill (where even wormcasts are *persona non grata*), mown in perfect military stripes and watched over by a slightly obsessive, almost invariably male, gardener. The lawn is the common thread that links every designer and virtually every garden from the rolling lawns of great houses like Anglesey Abbey in Cambridge, through the drama of places like the Theatre Lawn at Hidcote, to the playgrounds in back gardens everywhere.

Historically, a lawn was a clearing in woodland, a pause where motes of sunshine danced; all cropped grass, frolicking bunnies and resting princesses. Over the years it has become the central focus of the majority of gardens. The process began in the early 1600s when areas of mown grass were grown around great houses. The lawn was seen as a status symbol (and, to everybody's satisfaction, caused much envious huffing among the French), which was not surprising as the maintenance was pretty onerous, involving teams of gardeners wielding scythes.

It remained the territory of the rich and powerful through the age of Capability Brown, when lawns ran up to ha-has and the gradually unfurling landscape beyond, until the invention of the lawnmower and the emergence of suburbia and the middle classes. Only then did the principle of lawns for all become widespread.

A lot of demands are made of our lawns. In order to satisfy its job description, the lawn needs to be many things: goalmouth, wicket, athletics track, canine gymnasium, deckchair, playpen, mattress and, of course, background to our plants and borders. Maintenance is easy but time consuming, and gardeners in this century have more exciting things to do than all that spiking, raking and winking out of plantains with table knives. The uncertain nature of our climate and paucity of rainfall (especially in the overpopulated south) means that it is no longer either practical

or desirable to pour gallons of water on to our lawns. There is a dilemma here: we all want our lawns to be green and lush, so it's a great disappointment when, at the height of summer, they are brown with the texture of an overcooked fishcake. We either have to live with it or seek alternatives; one thing is sure – and this I personally guarantee – your established lawn will not die and its verdancy and general springiness will return as soon as the first rains fall.

The simplest solution is to make the lawn smaller. I have a theory that it is considerably less time-consuming to look after a larger, well-planted border than to have the seemingly endless task of mowing a large expanse of lawn. Alternatively, it may be the excuse you were looking for to put in a vegetable patch (more work but much better nutritionally), or to expand any paved sitting areas (more initial outlay, but maintenance reduced to a bit of sweeping).

WELCOME SMATTERINGS OF DAISIES AND SMILE ON COLONIES OF CLOVER

Either way, the net result is that if the lawn is smaller, then any temporary brownness is easier to ignore. The side benefit of this is that less lawn equals less mowing, therefore smaller mower. It may be that the time is ripe for a return to the manual mower: no noxious carbon and not much noise beyond the whirring click of spinning blades and the operator's grunts of effort. One of the selling points of Edwin Budding's original invention was that "country gentlemen may find in using my machine themselves an amusing, useful and healthy exercise". Dump the overpriced gym and mow the lawn.

In smaller gardens it is often a good idea to get rid of grass completely. Replacing lawns with gravel solves dead-looking-lawn syndrome very neatly, and gives space for more drought-tolerant plants. However, it does not satisfy all those other things that we want from our lawns – balls do not bounce and it is impossible to walk on it in bare feet. The very early domestic lawns, planted by the Tudors, were not of grass at all, but of closely planted chamomile (there is one like this at Buckingham Palace). Bar some initial weeding, this forms an extremely low-maintenance, sweet-smelling lawn. The disadvantages are that it needs sharp drainage and will not tolerate much traffic – football and energetic rolling around will do it no good whatsoever. However, confined to a small patch, or even as a raised seat, it or indeed other low-growing herbs, such as thyme or oregano, can work well.

The third possibility is to keep the lawn but change one's attitude. To welcome smatterings of daisy and buttercup, to smile upon enlarging colonies of clover and to shrug off the attentions of flocks of moss. It really doesn't matter if the odd weed wriggles past your defences (in fact they often remain green long after the finer grasses have curled up), and the time spent in the battle for perfect grass is better spent tending vegetables or staring at the clouds. If you have a slightly larger garden, then let part of your grass grow and mow paths through it. This is particularly effective if you have a wilder bit at the end of the garden, as by leaving a slightly ragged area you will see more butterflies, bees and birds than you will ever find loitering around a lawn that is neatly mown.

The careless romanticism of the perfect meadow is a labour of love – all that uncombed informality is the result of careful preparation. If you want the waving poppies and fluttering cornflowers of the imagination, there are three golden rules: the soil must be extremely needy; the seed mix must suit the conditions (chalk or clay, sun or shade), and you must not cut it until after the

CLIVE NICHOLS, ANDREW LAWSON

Left: a relaxed lawn with cow parsley and *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation'. Below: ox-eye daisy seeds have been scattered in the grass to make a wildflower area



GARDENS

seed has fallen. I have a meadow that has been a constant struggle because (*mea maxima culpa*) it was rushed, and as a result the earth is far too rich and allows the grass to grow with too much zeal. Even so, I still enjoy the benefit of having flowering grasses, teasels and some fantastic buttercups.

One thing is certain: we will always need lawns. Images of summer picnics and the first steps of smiling toddlers would be less powerful without them. The lawn is a classic and much-loved ingredient of the English garden. However, being classic is no excuse for complacency. Be brave and try something new; for gardening is the same as life – a little risk makes the heart beat faster. ■

James Alexander-Sinclair teams up with Nigel Colborn to offer design and planting ideas in the Green With Envy gardening show: May 2, Barrow-in-Furness; May 3, Lytham St Annes; June 27, Ludlow. More at www.allelectricproductions.co.uk. For tips on how to make a velvet lawn, visit www.timesonline.co.uk/gardens.

HOW DOES YOUR LAWN GROW?



GAP PHOTOS

ALTERNATIVE LAWNS

- For chamomile lawns, only plant the non-flowering clone *Chamaenelum nobile* 'Treneague'.
- For thyme lawns, use low-creeping wild thyme *Thymus serpyllum*, or when planted through gravel, the cultivar *Thymus* 'Porlock' (above).
- Other possibilities include clover and moss. Allow moss to spread – this is effective in small, shady gardens.
- Dig in lots of grit to help with drainage.
- Do not use in areas of heavy traffic.

LAI-D-BACK LAWNS

- Allow the grass to grow a little longer in outlying parts.
- Mow hard in April and again in August, allowing grasses, buttercups, cow parsley, etc, to flower. The grass will grow too strongly to allow annuals like poppies and cornflowers to be happy.

- Plant with daffodils, camassias and fritillaries to extend flowering time. The longer grass will cover up any fading foliage.
- Augment your relaxed lawn with wild flowers in plugs (small rooted plants). Ox-eye daisies, primulas, violas, field scabious and burnets are all available and should do well. Try www.britishflora.co.uk or www.wildflowers.co.uk.

MEADOWS

- If you want a real meadow, then it is often best to start from scratch. One of the best places for seeds and advice is Emorsgate Wild Seeds (www.wildseed.co.uk).
- Christopher Lloyd's *Meadows* (Cassell Illustrated, £18.99) and Pam Lewis's *Sticky Wicket: Gardening in Tune with Nature* (Frances Lincoln, £16.99) both have lots of useful information.