

# Have you got more moss than grass in your lawn?



A new gardening column answering common gardening conundrums by Lynn O'Keeffe, DSc Horticulture, Craft gardener with the OPW at Portumna Castle Co. Galway and Horticulture tutor with the GRETB.

## WHY IS YOUR LAWN MOSSY?

Basically, all things being equal, grass would outgrow moss any day. You don't have a problem with moss in your lawn, you have unhappy grass. You can go out and spray herbicide on the moss, but the same problem will just come back next year, and you'll just have to buy that product again.

Moss is a slow growing plant quickly smothered by grass. So, if the moss is winning in your lawn what's going on? There's a few basic things grass needs to grow well.

## HEALTHY SOIL

A good healthy sward of grass needs fertile soil. If you mow your grass and bag it, and remove the clippings every time, you remove nutrients from the soil with each cut, and eventually the grass starts to struggle. Which is exactly why they recommend

removing the cuttings from a wildflower meadow- to slow down grass growth.

## SO, CAN YOU MULCH MOW I.E. NOT REMOVE THE CLIPPINGS?

The clippings will disappear in a matter of days, feeding the soil and the earthworms. But if people/children are walking across the lawn straight into the house they will walk some clippings in.

If you want to add fertility, it's worth noting that the Sports Turf professionals use seaweed feed to get that lovely deep green colour required by TV cameras. Pelleted chicken manure would be another option for a spring dressing. But be careful and don't add too much as the more you feed the more you have to mow and it can become a vicious cycle!

## CAN YOU MOW LESS OFTEN THEN?

Allowing the grass to grow a bit taller gives it an advantage over moss in height and it gives it a chance to recover between mowing. It also lets the daisies and dandelions flower which is great for pollinators as well as

reducing the time you spend mowing! So, consider raising the blades and mowing every 3/4 weeks or even 5/6 weeks depending on your grass growth and mower strength.

## DRAINAGE

Grass requires good drainage to grow well. So, a waterlogged soil will give moss the upper hand. This is where scarifying comes in. A scarifier is a machine you can rent that will put many little holes into the grass thatch down into the soil. You then need to rake off what has come up and then brush in sand into the holes. This can be done manually with a garden fork by making multiple holes at regular intervals to aid drainage. If the drainage is beyond the capabilities of a scarifier, it's probably best to abandon lawn altogether and create a bog garden or pond instead.

## SUNSHINE

If you think of a fine field of lush green grass on a farm, it's an open sunny site. Grass needs good sunshine. So, if your lawn is very shady, it'll grow more moss than grass. Can you remove some of the shade by removing the lower branches of a tree or reducing the height of a hedge? If not maybe consider removing some of the lawn. How about planting it up with shrubs or flowers for shade?

Learn to live with the moss - it is soft and green, low maintenance and the birds use it to line their nests every spring. Moss is an important part of many garden birds' nests, so maybe hold off on the herbicide, and enjoy watching the garden birds pull clumps out and fly off with it instead.

## WHEN GRASS WON'T GROW WHAT ARE THE OTHER OPTIONS?

It's an uphill battle growing grass where it doesn't want to grow, a continuous cycle of buying and spreading feeds and herbicides, and resowing the baldy brown dead bits following herbicide applications, and then there's the mowing, the expense, the carbon footprint and so on and so forth. Honestly if you added it all up a



lawn is much higher maintenance than a wildflower meadow, shrubbery or an area of trees.

## PLANT SOME TREES INSTEAD

Consider marking off the area of shady lawn under existing trees and or plant a group of trees in it, and stop mowing there altogether, allowing a woodland grove to develop. You can put up a wee fence or stone wall or just leave a clear line between mown and unmown. Once the trees are up and running they won't be remotely worried about the height of the grass or whether it's been mown, they will grow quite

happily and bit by bit woodland plants like primroses and ferns might appear, or could be planted in. A path could be created through the woodland by mowing a strip or using bark mulch.

## HOW ABOUT A SHRUBBERY?

If grass doesn't want to be there, grow plants that do. Shade perennials include Brunnera (var. Jack Frost is gorgeous and flowers for months), lungwort (Pulmonaria, loved by the bees), the fabulous big white Calla lilies, primroses and primulas. Shrubs

for shade include Pheasant berry, Mahonia, Viburnums davidii and tinus, Berberis var., and then of course all the spring bulbs like bluebells, and crocus and daffodils, depending on just how shady it is. Shrubs and flowers are great for biodiversity, producing flowers for pollinators, berries for birds, as well as nesting and roosting spaces.

## TOP TIP

Low maintenance gardening is about growing the right plant in the right place! If the plant isn't happy there, it requires allot of effort to keep it growing- like lawns in shade! So, check if a plant suits your situation before planting it.

## THE LATEST IN LAWN CARE

The latest powerful lawn mowers are battery powered with a detachable battery pack that can also be used to run a strimmer or hedge trimmer. With 2 hours running time on heavy grass, you've little noise and reduced your carbon footprint.

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