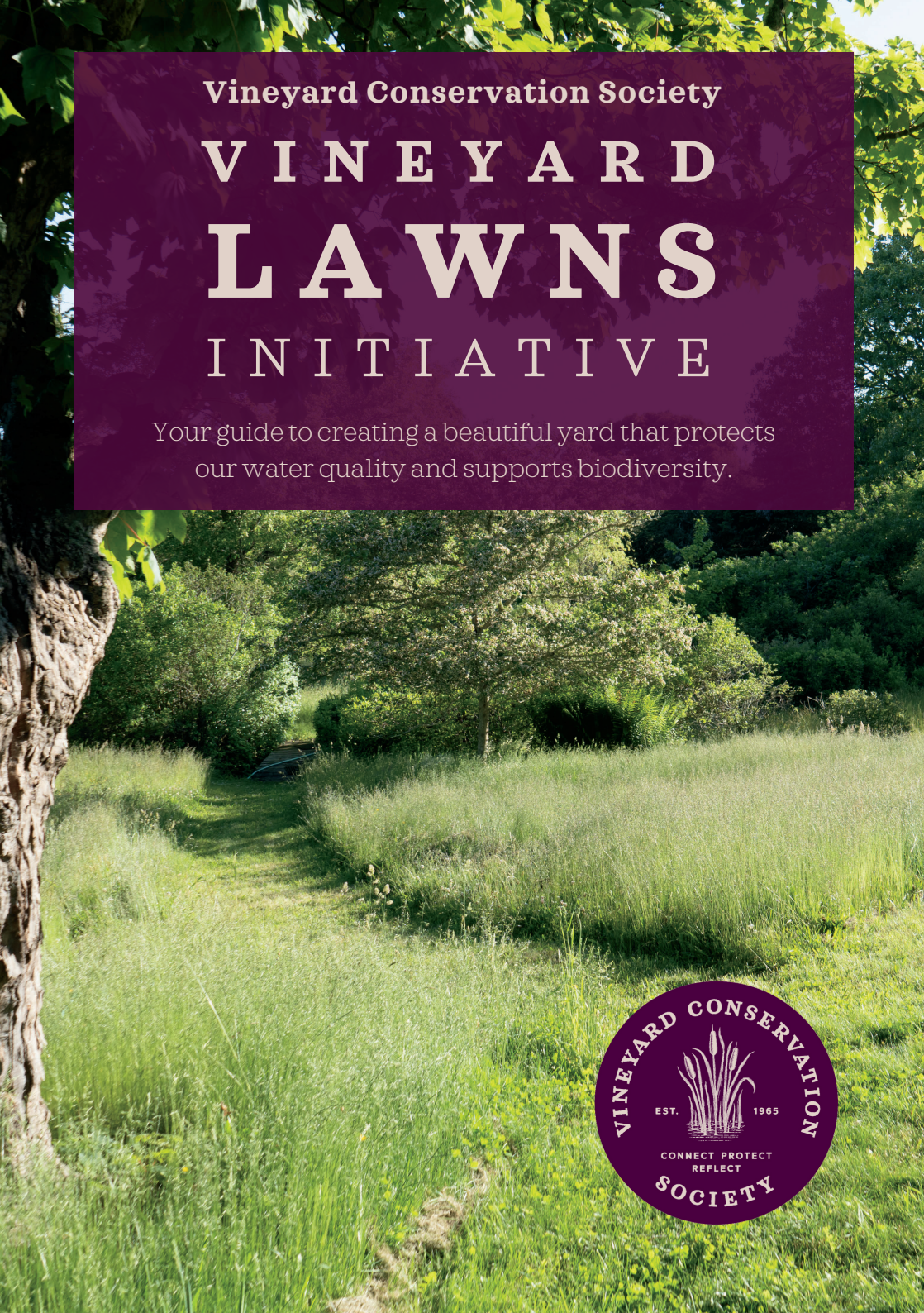
Vineyard Conservation Society

VINEYARD LAWNS INITIATIVE

Your guide to creating a beautiful yard that protects our water quality and supports biodiversity.




Love the Vineyard,
as the Vineyard.

The Concern

Today on Martha's Vineyard, we understand that what was once considered the "perfect" lawn – a vast emerald carpet, unblemished by weeds – is in fact highly detrimental to our Island's ecosystems. Protecting biodiversity and clean water depends not just on conserving wild spaces, but also on what we individuals do with our personal landscapes.

The Solution

Luckily, there's a better alternative to that ecologically barren monoculture lawn: the Vineyard Lawn, which uses mixed grass varieties and native plantings that are hardier and better adapted to local conditions, requiring less time, only occasional watering, and no harmful fertilizers or pesticides.

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OUR CHOICES MATTER

Conventional lawn care is harmful to ecosystems and community health

Ponds and Pollution

Our Vineyard ponds have been experiencing regular algal blooms that endanger humans, pets, and wildlife. A major cause of this problem is excess nitrogen in the water. While nitrogen is not a toxin, too much can throw entire ecosystems out of balance – and that is happening to our coastal ponds. A recent Great Pond Foundation study shows that about a quarter of this excess nitrogen comes from fertilizer, making it clearer than ever that eliminating lawn fertilization would go a long way to addressing the problem.

Mowing

Lawn mowing is overlooked as a substantial contributor to air pollution and climate change. Americans use 800 million gallons of gas yearly to mow their lawns, and the pollution caused by just one hour of mowing is equal to the average car driving 100 miles. It all adds up: gas-powered lawnmowers account for 5% of total air pollution in the USA.

Pesticide Use

Americans use 10 times more chemical pesticides on their lawns to keep them weed-free than farmers use on their crops. Many states and municipalities have banned lawn pesticides and herbicides because they pose a health risk, especially to children and pets.

Water and Electricity Use

The EPA estimates that nearly a third of all residential water is used outdoors, with most of that being for watering lawns. Worse, about half of the water sprinkled onto lawns is wasted through runoff and evaporation. All of that wasted water has a significant climate impact: pumping, treating, and distributing water accounts for 3-4% of the nation's total electricity consumption.

“The first couple of years, I'll be honest, the lawn looked scruffy. The non-native grass just didn't know how to live without its fix of artificial inputs.

Then something magical happened.

By cutting higher and leaving the clippings, the lawn started to self-fertilize. Wonderful native grasses appeared, taking over from the imports, and then wildflowers started popping up everywhere. Around year three, it was just gorgeous: rich, lush, and green.”

Geraldine Brooks, Island Resident

GETTING STARTED

For new & existing lawns

Make Your Lawn Smaller

The most important step is also the easiest: reduce the size. Replace some of the mowed lawn area with alternatives that add more interest, biodiversity, or even food production: low-maintenance groundcovers and other native plants, veggie gardens, and fruit trees. From organized pollinator gardens to just "letting it go" to allow wildflowers to bloom, every little bit helps!

Choosing Grass Seed

Not all grass species are created equal. For example, fescues and ryegrasses are better suited for the Vineyard climate than Kentucky Bluegrass.

- We recommend choosing a mix from a local garden center suited to your lawn's sun/shade conditions. This mix should include a diversity of fescues and ryegrasses, and ideally, no Kentucky Bluegrass.
- These blends require minimal fertilizer and water. They also have good drought tolerance, and most new varieties offer resistance to surface-feeding insects.

Transitioning an Existing Lawn

Are you ready to turn your chemical-addicted turf lawn into a Vineyard Lawn? If you work with a landscaper, you can collaborate on a plan that suits your landscape. Suggested topics to speak with your landscaper about or research on your own:

- Reducing lawn size and integrating native plants.
- Reducing and ultimately stopping the use of fertilizer.
- De-thatching and slit seeding.
- Following the maintenance program described in the next section.

Be patient; it can take up to a few years for your lawn to transition.


Decrease mowed area in favor of natural meadows.


Plant a pollinator garden with low-maintenance flowers and native plants.

LAWN MAINTENANCE

Stop Using Fertilizer

A healthy lawn can be self-sustaining. We encourage homeowners to eliminate lawn fertilizers due to the impacts of excess nitrogen on our ponds.
Instead of bagging your clippings, use a mulching mower or rake to spread them on your lawn. The clippings' nitrogen contribution should be enough to replace fertilizer.

Test Your Soil

Your soil's pH impacts the availability and uptake of nutrients. Accurate pH information will tell you what your lawn needs. Basic soil test kits are available at garden centers, but testing with a professional lab is the most accurate way to assess your soil needs.

Water Less

- Water early in the day, deeply, and less frequently. This method encourages deep root growth, improving your grass's ability to sustain itself during drought.
- Use a rain gauge to monitor rainfall and add water accordingly. A lawn only needs 3/4 -1" of rain per week. Overwatering can lead to disease and erode soil.

Aerate the Soil

All the help in the world cannot overcome compacted soil. If you suspect your lawn has areas of compaction, talk to your landscaper about aeration.

- If you see water pooling after a rainstorm or have areas that struggle to thrive, these might be signs of compaction.
- Aeration opens passages for air, water, and nutrients and improves soil life.

Mow Smart

Lawn growth fluctuates, so mow only as needed, not on a set schedule.

- Ensure your mower blades are sharp. Set the deck to the highest setting (3-3.5") to protect the soil from drying out and encourage strong roots.
- Go Electric. Electric yard care equipment has greatly improved, and you can sometimes even find rebates from sources like Mass Save (masssave.com).

Embrace Weeds & Natural Ground Cover

Rethink which plants can add value to your yard – flowers and other so-called "weeds" add colors and textures that beautify the space, all while supporting bees and other pollinators. Some even "fix" nitrogen – pulling it out of the air and making a natural slow-release fertilizer for the grass.

If you simply can't tolerate weeds, pull them by hand instead of treating the lawn with chemicals.

Clover

Adds nutrients by fixing nitrogen
(full sun to shade)

Wildflowers

Support our pollinator populations
(full sun to shade)

Moss

Increases nutrient cycling
(shade)

Accept Seasonality

Vineyard lawns naturally go dormant in August and flush back to green as soon as cooler temperatures and rain return in September. The more we can tolerate seasonal fluctuations and let our lawns be golden in high summer, the better for our environment.

On Ticks

No one on Martha's Vineyard takes the threat of tick-borne disease lightly. So we understand the concerns people have about reduced mowing. The Vineyard Lawn concept is to limit your mowed lawn to the area you actively use, not to abandon it entirely.

The most effective tick-prevention measures focus on the individual, not the environment: use insect repellent, wear treated clothing, and protect pets so they don't bring ticks inside. VCS opposes spraying for ticks (and/or mosquitos), even with organic or "natural" sprays because they harm pollinators and other wildlife. Don't believe the hype: the truth is that there is no such thing as a product that can be sprayed into the environment to effectively kill the "bad bugs" without also hurting the good things.

RESOURCES

Local Assistance

- Contact BiodiversityWorks and ask about their Natural Neighbors program. They will assess your property and advise you on how best to support wildlife and the natural ecosystem.
  - Find information at biodiversityworksmv.org
- Polly Hill Arboretum promotes using a Native Plant Selection Tool to help you identify the best plants for your property.
  - Find information at plantfinder.nativeplanttrust.org/Plant-Search

Where to Buy?

Grass Seed

- Grass seed is available at MV garden supply stores.
- We recommend the widely available Jonathan Green “Black Beauty” Heavy Traffic Mix.

Soil Testing Kits

- At-home testing kits are available in MV garden supply stores.
- Umass Amherst provides more comprehensive soil test services.

Be an Advocate!

- Encourage your neighborhood to take the “no fertilizer pledge” and to keep pesticides out of their landscapes. Contact VCS to schedule a presentation for your homeowners association.
- Encourage your landscaper to collaborate with you on integrating the principles outlined in this pamphlet.

Need more information?

Email us your questions or concerns, or check out our website below. We are here to support your transition to a Vineyard Lawn.

This initiative is supported by a grant from the Edey Foundation.

The Vineyard Conservation Society is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to preserving the environment of Martha's Vineyard through advocacy, education, and the protection of the Island's land and water.

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Adopt a Vineyard Lawn

for our ponds.
for our health.
for our wildlife.
for our community.

for our Island.

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