

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

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Getting to Know Your Yard

By John Fech, UNL Extension Horticulture Educator

It's a common assumption that grass can be grown just about anywhere. Well, it can--but not well. In fact, grass plants are as dependent on location as flowers and vegetables. Although it's easy to assume that your lawn is growing in the most logical places, chances are a few areas would be better off without grass, while at least one bed of ornamentals or shrubbery would look and function better as lawn. So, try to think of the yard as a blank slate, even if you've lived in the same place for twenty years.

To get started, step outside and look at your yard as if you've never seen it before. Simply walk around with an open mind and your favorite drink in your hand, making mental notes about what would look good in each part of the landscape. For now, resist the temptation to think of specific plants. Instead, visualize general shapes and forms of plant material. Picture the various activities that you and your family like to engage in--touch football, backyard barbeques, sunbathing. This will get you ready for preparing an inventory and analysis.

You may wish to ask a friend or neighbor with a healthy lawn to join you for a stroll around your property and make suggestions. Have a clipboard in hand to record any ideas that strike you as helpful. For a fresh perspective on the home landscape, you might also ask if you can view your yard from a neighbor's top story or deck. The point of this odd sounding request is that it is much easier to understand the lawn's layout from above ground level.

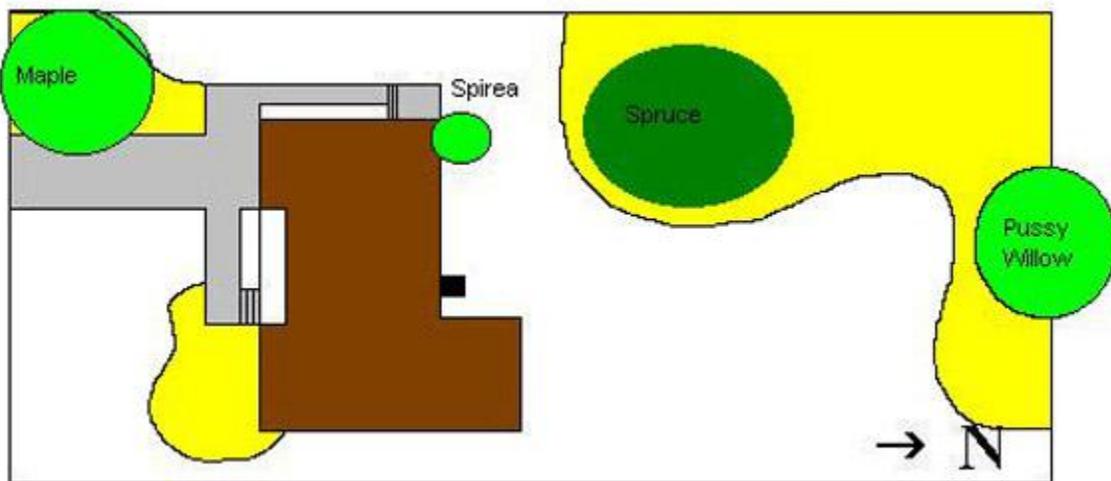
A casual tour of your property is a start, but I suggest that you arm yourself with a clipboard and go through a four-step process that will guide you to making smart decisions.

Step 1. Do an inventory. Begin by drawing a simple map of the site. With a blank piece of graph paper in your clipboard, rough-in the driveway, the house, the patio, and other structures that are not likely to change in the next 5 years. (If you have access to the property's plat or survey, you can use a copy for the base map). Next, note the site's qualities on the map. Here are some specific areas to focus on:

- Vegetable gardens. Record whether plants are healthy and producing well, or showing signs of disease.
- Groupings of ornamentals. Look for blotches on the leaves, a possible sign of foliar disease. Note plants that produce some leaves, but don't flower or look thrifty, which is often caused by the presence of pathogenic diseases or putting the plant in the wrong

place.

- Soils. Identify areas where there tends to be standing water; cracks or ruts in the ground tend to indicate chronically wet spots.
- Lawn. Look for off-colored grass and thin, worn-out areas, as well as healthy and thriving sections of lawn.
- Trees. Note where trees with a dense, thick canopy produce heavy shade. Look for areas where falling leaves may smother the lawn.



Step 2. Do an analysis. Write down your judgements about these landscape elements on the plan, using a different color of pen or pencil to help the analysis stand out from the inventory.

For example, if the inventory noted that there are 3 to 4 hours of shade at one side of the house, the analysis might add that it is filtered shade and not heavy shade, and that it falls only in the morning.

Together these two sets of details will suggest the level of adaptability that a grass species must have to thrive there and influence your eventual plant and grass selection. You may be a fan of creeping red fescue, but it won't survive long in hot afternoon sun, and the inventory-and-analysis process will keep you from making expensive and time-consuming mistake of using this species for a full sun location.

- Vegetable gardens. If the veggies look great and the garden receives 8 hours of sun each day, then leave it as it is now. However, if the area gets only 3 hours of sun and the plants are pale, covered with mildew, and producing only a few fruits, then it's a good idea to rip out the vegetable plants and plant the garden to a shade-adapted groundcover or

species of grass.

- Groupings of ornamentals. If there are blotches on the leaves, the shrubs may simply need a good pruning to increase air flow through them. Check to see if the soil is soggy, or if the stems are infested with scale insects. The number of hours of sun is a critical point for certain plants; viburnums won't flower and burning bush (euonymous) won't turn red in fall if they are not located in full sun.
- Soils. Standing water will cause most plants to struggle due to low oxygen levels. Consider changing larger areas to a pond or planting a mini-wetland with reeds, rushes, and cattails. Cracks and ruts from the lawn mower wheels usually indicate the soil is too hard to support good root growth, or that the yard is compacted from excessive foot traffic.
- Lawn areas. Off-colored, thin, or worn-out areas may indicate a poor choice of grass species. *Trees. If trees cast a heavy shade on the lawn for several hours each day, then you should select from shade-adapted grasses, such as tall fescue, fine fescue or mixtures of fescue and shade adapted cultivars of Kentucky bluegrass.

Step 3. Locate the areas for lawns and gardens. After the inventory and analysis notes are down on paper, lay a sheet of translucent paper on top for this next step. Now it's time to decide how each area of the yard would be used best. For example, areas that are in full sun, mostly flat, and well drained tend to be good places to grow a lawn. Using a pencil, outline these areas to make simple lawn shapes. Try to avoid creating long, narrow, linear, or strictly geometric shapes for lawns, unless you desire a very formal yard; these shapes are harder to water, fertilize, and mow. Feel free to erase and start over if your first shapes don't seem pleasing. Even the most accomplished landscape designers will draw several shapes in arriving at a good outline. Pick a color with which to shade in parts of the landscape that are well suited for a lawn.

If the inventory and analysis suggest that grass is not the best choice for an area, consider alternatives such as groundcovers, perennial flowers, and shrubs. As you divide up the yard, keep in mind that beds of groundcovers and ornamentals typically require less work once established than lawns. Indicate each of these non-lawn areas with its own color. Finally, you may want to move existing features. For example, if the vegetable garden isn't in full sun, designate a new area for it in a part of the landscape that is free of shade most of the day.

Step 4. Choose a grass species. Finally, you're ready to select the plants, including one or more types of lawn grass. Each species of grass has an ideal set of conditions that, if met in your yard, will allow it to thrive. After you have identified lawn areas, use the notes from the inventory and analysis to select from the grasses in terms of sun, shade, traffic, disease or insect problems, soil conditions, and slope of the land.