



SQUARE FEET

Corporate Landscaping Lets Its Hair Down

More companies are eschewing manicured grass in favor of native plants, a shift driven by the environmental costs of installing and maintaining lawns.

By Jane Margolies

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At its former headquarters in eastern Pennsylvania, Air Products had a neatly manicured lawn and boxwood hedges. But when the industrial gases company moved to nearby Allentown recently and erected a new office building, it tried something different.

Rather than plant grass that would need constant watering, mowing and fertilizing, it turned to native plants that pretty much took care of themselves. Today, shoulder-high grasses wave in the wind and attract wildlife.

“One plant had yellow finches all around it,” said Patrick J. Garay, vice president of strategic projects at Air Products.

Forget the fuss. Corporate landscapes are going natural these days.

The shift — mirroring what’s happening at public parks, on university campuses and in homeowners’ backyards — is being driven by a growing awareness of the environmental costs of installing and maintaining lawns, clipped hedges and tidy flower borders. New laws ban the use of water for “useless” grass in drought-prone areas, and company sustainability programs encompass the land the buildings sit on. Apps calculate the carbon footprint of landscapes in much the same way that buildings are monitored for greenhouse gas emissions.

“There’s a lot more science and ecological rigor behind planting design,” said Michael Grove, the chair of landscape architecture, civil engineering and ecology at Sasaki, a design firm that has been involved in developing two carbon-tracking apps.

The pushback against conventional landscaping might surprise those who assume that all green plants must be equally good for the planet.

But as manicured lawns give way to meadows and borders of annuals are replaced by wild and woolly native plants, a looser, some might say messier, aesthetic is taking hold. Call it the horticultural equivalent of bedhead.

The new wave of landscape design is reacting to the image of a corporate campus from the mid-20th century. Buildings often sit in velvety emerald carpets that contribute to the more than 40 million acres of lawn in America. Can the public get used to the new look?

“It requires a significant mind-set shift,” said José Almiñana, a principal at Andropogon, the landscape architecture firm that designed Air Products’ site.

Kentucky bluegrass, a common lawn grass, draws carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. But propagating the same grass species everywhere comes at the expense of native plants that are in tune with the local climate and provide food and habitat for endangered birds, bees and butterflies. And then there’s the environmental cost of keeping lawns lush — the endless watering, weed killing, mowing and blowing.



A meadow at the Air Products headquarters in Allentown, Pa. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times



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Landscape equipment emits nearly 27 million tons of pollutants a year, according to estimates. One gas-powered leaf blower used for an hour generates the same amount of emissions as a car driving 1,100 miles.

As the climate crisis has grown increasingly dire, many companies have turned to their landscapes to help them hit sustainability targets and vaunt their environmental bona fides.

“The building reaches a private audience, but the landscape is visible to the public,” said Barbara Deutsch, chief executive of Landscape Architecture Foundation, a nonprofit organization.

At Ford Motor’s headquarters in Dearborn, Mich., lawn is everywhere. But after the company released a campus master plan that proposed more “natural environments,” it decided to rethink the 20 acres of grass at an arboretum. The lawn under and around the trees sometimes had to be mowed “multiple times a week,” said Christopher Small, Ford’s design manager for global campus master planning and architecture.

Working with the landscape architecture firm OJB, Ford expanded the arboretum site and regraded it to include ponds to capture and filter storm water. The company planted prairie grasses and wildflowers and threaded walking paths through the foot-high meadow that now needs mowing only twice a year.

“Fifteen years ago when we proposed something like that, we would get a lot of strange looks,” James Burnett, president of OJB, said. “It’s a much easier sell now.”

In a 2021 survey of more than 500 members of the American Society of Landscape Architects, a professional organization, three-quarters said they had more clients requesting design solutions to address climate change than they did the previous year.

State and local regulations are also promoting change.

Storm water management requirements have spurred the creation of vegetated ditches known as bioswales to reduce runoff when it rains. A new Nevada law will prohibit using water from the Colorado River, which has been shrinking from decades of overuse and drought worsened by climate change, to irrigate “nonfunctional, or “useless,” grass. Property owners who replace nonnative grass, shrubs and trees with desert plants can get rebates on their water bills.

Los Angeles has enrolled 298 commercial, industrial and institutional customers in its own rebate program since 2015, with companies getting \$5 per square foot to swap out turf for California poppies and other drought-tolerant and native plants, said Terrence McCarthy, manager of the city's water resources policy. Companies that made the switch no longer have to run sprinklers all the time, reducing their water bills, he added.



A green roof at the Air Products headquarters. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times



The campus attracts wildlife, including deer. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times

The U.S. Green Building Council, which administers the LEED certification for sustainable buildings, has a comparable program, SITES, for landscapes that promote biodiversity, conserve resources and protect ecosystems. Of the 317 projects enrolled in the program, 11 percent are commercial, Danielle Pieranunzi, the program's director, said. "It's not just designing for aesthetics," she added.

Hewlett-Packard received a SITES certification for its Boise, Idaho, campus after working with the landscape architecture firm Stack Rock Group to replace turf grass with a native seed mix that reduced water use and mowing — cutting landscaping costs nearly 50 percent and emissions 90 percent. One thing that increased: honey production for the campus beekeeping club, presumably because the pollinating insects had a buffet to feast on. HP then spent \$404,000 overhauling its campus in Corvallis, Ore., earning SITES certification for that property, too.

These new landscapes may not instantly be carefree, however. Until the natives spread, invasive plants may need to be weeded out. And establishing a meadow is not necessarily cheaper than putting in lawn and flower borders.

But the environmental gains can be significant. Meadows benefit pollinators and enrich soil, according to new research. Some landscapes are being designed to be "climate positive," drawing from the atmosphere more carbon than what was emitted in their installation and maintenance.

Pamela Conrad, a landscape architect, developed a carbon-tracking app that provided guidance for ways site planners could sock away more carbon. So far, 787 projects have been put through their paces on the app, with last year's projects reducing their carbon footprint 12 percent, Ms. Conrad said.

"If you add paving, your number score goes down and it will take 50 years to offset your carbon footprint," she said. "If you add trees, it will only take 10 years."

Even companies embracing ecological approaches still often want some lawn for throwing a Frisbee or working outdoors. But many are keeping lawns to a minimum, using native grasses or simply mowing less.

The reaction to the shaggier look appears to be mixed. In places where property owners observe "No Mow May" — leaving mowers idle until June — irate neighbors have come over with their own machines. One Maryland couple fought their homeowner association over their decision to grow sunflowers and phlox instead of grass. (Their battle ended up changing state law.)

“There’s a perception that if it looks a little wild, it looks like it’s not taken care of,” said Chris Guillard, a principal at the landscape architecture firm CMG.



Landscape architects say more clients are asking for design solutions to address climate change. Michelle Gustafson for The New York Times

At its new Allentown site, Air Products encountered “questions about what we had done,” Mr. Garay said, especially when the meadows had just been planted and “looked like a weed field.”

Air Products explained its new approach in a company newsletter and posted signs around its property. Mr. Garay spoke at a community meeting about how meadows could benefit the environment.

“Once people hear the why, you can see them nodding their heads,” he said. “People are beginning to understand that these little impacts add up.”

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