

# In the Garden

Your backyard is an extension of your home. Outdoor living is a trendy and chic way to increase living space that many homeowners are embracing. Although this can increase your living space, it is important to consider your water use. Municipal water consumption can more than double in the summer due to high outdoor water usage. The following section provides suggestions on how to reduce the amount of water needed for your outdoor space.

## Designing a Landscape is More Than Planting

Creating a new yard starts with choosing a good design to fit your landscape. When considering the type of landscape you should create, ask yourself:

- How do I want to use my outdoor space?
- What type of soil do I have?
- What are the natural conditions of my property?
- How much time and effort would I like to commit to my lawn and garden?
- What is the most practical groundcover for my landscape?
- What kind of plants should I use?
- What can I do with the shaded areas of my property?
- Can container gardening enhance my property?
- How do I care for my lawn and garden?
- Should I remove bugs from my landscape?

# Outdoor Space

## How Do I Want to Use My Outdoor Space?

There are many options when it comes to designing your outdoor space. Think about who will be using the space (kids, teens, pets, etc.) and what you would like the function of the space to be - play area, dining area, entertaining, flower garden, vegetable garden or all of the above.

Once you have an idea of how you would like to use the space, draw out a quick sketch of what you would like your property to look like. Once you have a sketch of what you want to do with your yard, you can start to look at the details that will go into your future landscape.

## What Type of Soil Do I Have?

Most soils in York Region are either sandy or clay, while some small areas have loamy soil. To determine what soil type you have, try this quick test. Pick up a handful of moist but not wet soil and squeeze it. Open your hand, if the soil stays together and retains its shape you have clay soil. If the soil falls apart when you open your hand, you have sandy soil. If the soil stays together when you open your hand but then starts to slowly fall apart, you have loamy soil.



Clay soils have a lot of nutrients but are very slow to drain. Sandy soils do not hold nutrients or moisture very well. Loamy soils drain at a moderate rate and retain nutrients. If you have clay or sandy soils there are ways to improve your soil quality.

A good soil base is important for any plant to survive. If you have clay or sandy soil, the best way to improve it is to add organic matter such as compost. Mixing in compost prior to planting provides plants with the nutrients required to thrive while improving the soil's ability to hold an adequate amount of moisture. For an established garden, spread two to three centimetres of compost on top of the soil and under the mulch in the spring or fall. Earthworms and other garden critters will do the work of mixing the compost into your soil, saving you time and reducing the risk of damaging plant roots.



Need inspiration? Visit your local library or browse through some gardening magazines for ideas. If the plants used in the magazines are not water-efficient, they can be easily substituted with those in our Water Efficient Plant Guide.

### **What Are the Natural Conditions of My Property?**

Before you begin selecting plants and groundcover, it is important to monitor the natural condition of your property so you will know what type of groundcover and/or plants you should be using. Some elements to familiarize yourself with include:

- The amount of sunlight your property receives and at what time of day
- Areas of shade
- Slope
- Moist or dry areas

### **How Much Time and Effort Would I Like to Commit to My Lawn and Garden?**

Some people enjoy spending hours working on their lawns and gardens, while others have little time to spend there. Although there is no such thing as a no-maintenance landscape, with proper planning, you can create a low-maintenance landscape.

Choosing plants to match the conditions of your property will make things much easier for your landscape maintenance. Your plants will also be stronger and naturally able to resist pests and disease. Water-efficient landscapes are naturally low-maintenance.

Using a pool cover regularly can reduce water loss due to evaporation by approximately 50 per cent of your total pool volume. Also, remember to inspect your pool equipment and hoses for leaks on a regular basis.





# Landscape

## **What is the Most Practical Groundcover for My Landscape?**

Now that you are aware of the natural conditions of your property, you can select the appropriate groundcover to match the conditions of the location to be planted. The typical groundcover we use is turf, or grass. If you have areas where grass does not grow well, or if you want a lower maintenance groundcover, then consider some of the many alternatives to grass.

## **Selecting the right groundcover**

More and more gardeners are turning to groundcover alternatives to grass. Groundcover alternatives are plants that are low-lying and will spread quickly to cover large areas. These alternative groundcovers need little if any maintenance once established, will grow in areas that grass will not and are inexpensive to maintain.

## Water Efficiency AN AT-HOME GUIDE

There are a wide variety of groundcovers including perennial plants, shrubs, evergreen trees, ornamental grasses, ferns and herbs. Many groundcovers are drought-tolerant and thrive in exposed, dry locations, while others tolerate wet soils and deep shade. For locations where little else will grow or access is difficult, plant one or more groundcovers and the area will be transformed in very little time.

### Selecting grass seed

If you decide that grass is the most appropriate groundcover for your property, there are a few things you should consider to help create a more robust lawn. When purchasing seed, look for a high quality blend for 'Northern Climate' which is virtually weed free. By using a blend of seeds, you are introducing a variety of grass types into your lawn to create a healthier and more resilient turf area. Generally, a mix of Kentucky Blue Grass, Perennial Rye Grasses and fescues are a good mix for your lawn. You may also consider White Clover (20 – 25 per cent in the mix), which is a great addition to a grass seed. It stays green during hot, dry weather, requires little mowing, and the roots of the plants produce nitrogen in the soil.

Before you buy, read the product label and look for Canada Certified No. 1 seed. This provides assurances about the purity and per cent germination rates.



Did you know? Washing your car with the hose can use approximately 400 litres of water per wash. The best way to reduce your water consumption is to go to a commercial car wash. This will not only reduce your water usage but will also prevent chemicals and pollutants from entering our storm sewers because car washes discharge to the sanitary sewer instead of the storm sewer. If you must wash your car at home, try using a bucket and sponge instead of running the hose - this could save you approximately 300 litres of water.

## What Kind of Plants Should I Use?

Similar to grass and groundcover selection, designing a landscape includes choosing the appropriate plants for your specific garden. By selecting plants suitable to the conditions of the site, very little irrigation will be necessary. For help selecting the appropriate plants for your needs, please visit your local garden centre or download our Water Efficient Plant Guide at [www.waterfortomorrow.ca](http://www.waterfortomorrow.ca)



## What can I do with the shaded areas of my property?

Shade gardens offer a cool place away from the heat of summer. Similar to the other areas of your property, evaluate the natural conditions of the shaded area and choose your plants according to the proper conditions.

Below are some tips to help in your plant selection:

- If the area is mainly shaded but gets more than four hours of sun each day, look for plants that thrive in part-shade or part-sun
- If the area receives dappled sun throughout the day, look for water-efficient plants that do best in full shade conditions
- If the area gets little to no sun at all, you may want to consider an alternative to plants such as a decorative mulch, a sitting area or some interesting garden artwork
- Plants such as Hostas and Heuchera (Coral Bells) come in many different varieties with an assortment of foliage that can add constant colour to shaded areas

## Can Container Gardening Enhance My Property?

Container planting is a great way to add colour and beauty to patios, decks, steps and walkways. While window boxes, hanging baskets and other planters are charming accents for homes, daily watering is often required to keep plants healthy and blooming. It is possible to create beautiful container gardens that do not require daily watering by choosing from a large selection of water-efficient annuals, perennials, herbs and ornamental grasses.

### *Water wise annuals for container gardens*

African Daisies, Cornflowers, Golden Fleece, Portulaca and California Poppies can provide a colour-packed display throughout the season and require little water and maintenance. For a complete list of water-efficient annuals, download our Water Efficient Plant Guide at [www.waterfortomorrow.ca](http://www.waterfortomorrow.ca)

### *Herbs and grasses add visual interest to planters*

Many herbs have flowers, are drought-tolerant and thrive in average to poor soil. Combine herbs, annuals or perennials in one container or try a collection of herb-filled planters. Many herbs have pleasing foliage and aromas, so once the flowers are spent you can enjoy the greenery – or snip a bit to add to your cooking or salads.

For a dramatic statement, consider using ornamental grasses in your containers. Grouped or individually, grasses add architectural interest to any planter arrangement. Before purchasing ornamental grasses check for their height at maturity as some grasses grow very tall.

Be sure to check our Water Efficient Plant Guide at [www.waterfortomorrow.ca](http://www.waterfortomorrow.ca) before buying ornamental grasses. Try to choose one of the plants from the guide to avoid planting an invasive species.



### *Tips for water-hungry containers*

To reduce water use and keep your plants happy and healthy throughout the season, try the following:

- Line porous containers including terra cotta, cement pots and fibre-lined wire baskets with plastic bags to reduce moisture loss
- Apply five centimetres of mulch on top of the soil to help keep the soil cool and reduce moisture loss
- If you are going to be away for a few days, set pots in a shallow container of water and move them to a location that is shaded during the hottest part of the day
- Group containers close together so plants will help shade each other
- Use a narrow spout watering can or hose attachment to reduce spillage
- Where possible, set containers in a deep base and water from the bottom to encourage roots to move downward and away from the warmer, dryer surface soil



For very hot areas, consider creating a container with some of the many varieties of succulents.

# Care

## **How Do I Care For My Lawn and Garden?**

Achieving and maintaining a healthy lawn and garden is simple. Understanding how to care for your lawn and plants will ensure that you are not wasting time on unnecessary maintenance.

### *How much water does my lawn and garden need?*

During the summer, water demand can more than double in York Region due to outdoor water use. It takes a lot of power and chemicals to treat water to ensure it meets all of the federal guidelines and provincial standards for drinking water. It also takes significant energy to pump the water throughout York Region. As a result, there are restrictions on the amount of water that can be treated. When excessive outdoor water demand occurs in the summer, it can drop our reservoir levels to the point where no extra water is available for emergencies (such as fire fighting).





To reduce your water use in the summer months, try using less tap water outside. One way to do this is by installing a rain barrel. Rain barrels collect stormwater by connecting directly to your downspout. The water can then be used on your garden instead of using treated tap water. For more information please visit [www.waterfortomorrow.ca](http://www.waterfortomorrow.ca)

The time of day you choose to water your lawn and garden is just as important as how much water you apply. The best time to water is in the early morning or during the evening hours. Watering your lawn or garden during the hottest part of the day will increase water loss due to evaporation. It also increases the chances of burning your grass and/or flowers when water droplets magnify the sun's rays.

### *Specific tips for lawn watering*

Excessive lawn watering leads to shallow root growth, which makes the grass more vulnerable to diseases, pests and drought. Water once a week at most and only if there has not been sufficient rainfall (1.5 to 2.5 centimetres) within the past week. This encourages deep, strong root growth and will ensure that your lawn can better cope with the hot, dry weather of summer. Use a watering gauge to measure the amount of water that is applied to your grass through rainfall and watering.

### *Why does my grass go brown in hot, dry weather?*

Grass, like other vegetation, goes dormant and becomes inactive during drought conditions. Dormancy enables the grass to survive extended periods of hot, dry weather. If your grass turns a tawny or brownish colour during dry spells, it is entering this dormancy condition. When the rain returns so will the green in your lawn.



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Overwatering your lawn will cause shallow root growth, leaving your lawn prone to diseases, pests and drought.

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## Water Efficiency AN AT-HOME GUIDE

During periods of extended dry weather, York Region may implement watering restrictions to protect the municipal water supply for emergency situations. Do your part to help ensure that there is a reliable supply of water for all of the Region's residents by respecting water restrictions when they are in place.

### *Specific tips for garden watering*

Once established, your garden (with the right plants in the proper place with good soil and mulch), shouldn't need much watering at all. Most of the perennials available on the market are better with less water, rather than too much. Many common garden problems such as mould, mildew, rust, slugs and earwigs thrive in moist environments. To get your plants established, water deeply, once a week for the first three to four weeks. If there has been an extended time without any rain, you may want to add supplementary water for your plants. Once your perennials are established, they shouldn't need much water at all, only during long periods of hot, dry weather. It is normal for your plants to look wilted on a hot summer afternoon as this is a natural adaptation to combat the heat. Once it cools off at night, the plants should perk up again. If your plants are wilted at night, they need some water.

Annuals may require a bit more water through the summer as they do not have the same, well-established roots as perennials. Choose water-efficient species for a better tolerance to dry conditions. If you are unsure about when to water, put your finger into the soil. If it is dry down past 7.5 centimetres, water can be added. The best way to water your garden is with a soaker hose, underneath the mulch. Your garden can get enough water in a little as five minutes with a soaker hose.

*Hydrozoning:* Grouping your plants according to the amount of water they need to reduce any excess watering. If you have a plant that needs extra water, plant it near your rain barrel or hose for easier watering.



## *Vegetable garden watering*



Most vegetables need some watering to reach their full potential. However, with a few simple practices, you can easily create a water-efficient vegetable garden. Use a watering gauge to keep track of how much rain has fallen during the week, and provide additional water only if there hasn't been at least 2.5 centimetres of rain in the past week. There are some exceptions – new seedlings will need to be watered more frequently, and vegetables grown in very sandy soil may prefer smaller amounts of water spread throughout the week. A soaker hose running underneath the mulch works best for watering because it delivers water to the roots where it is needed.

The amount of water needed and when will also depend on the lifecycle of the plant. Soft fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes require a little extra water while their fruit is setting. Once the fruit starts ripening, less water is needed. For leafy vegetables, more water is needed as their hearts develop; for peas and beans, add water when they are flowering, and for potatoes, when the tubers begin to form. Perennial vegetables such as asparagus and rhubarb need very little water as they have well adapted and established root systems.

Group your vegetables and herbs according to their moisture needs. Herbs such as rosemary, sage, oregano, winter savoury and thyme, do best with little water. Their flavour is actually improved if grown in hot, dry conditions similar to those in their native countries.



Container planting of vegetables will use more water than in-ground gardening. Containers dry out much faster than garden beds and rows.

# Lawn Maintenance

## **Long grass is better for the health of your lawn**

Cutting grass too short makes your lawn vulnerable to disease, pests, weeds and drought. Longer grass promotes root growth and shades the soil surface, keeping soil temperatures cooler and reducing moisture loss. Set your mower to a height of six to eight centimetres each time you mow. Cut only the top one-third of the grass blade each time you mow and leave the grass clippings on the lawn.

## **Overseeding can help build a robust lawn**

Overseeding is the process of spreading a mixture of grass seeds on an established lawn. By introducing the right blend of grass seed to your lawn through overseeding, you can create a thicker, greener, more vigorous and stress tolerant lawn.

Most lawns in York Region contain Kentucky Bluegrass, a very high-maintenance grass. Kentucky Bluegrass is usually chosen because of its convenience as a rolled sod grass



rather than for each specific yard condition. When combined with proper mowing height, overseeding with the correct seed mix that includes Perennial Rye Grasses and fescues will improve the appearance and resilience of your lawn preventing weeds from establishing.



Overseeding can be done in the spring, fall or winter. Early spring seeding is good practice to repair small areas that are damaged, bare or thin from the winter. Seeding in the spring is best done between the end of April and the end of May. Applying seed in the fall will allow enough time for the grass to germinate before the ground freezes and during the cooler fall weather there is less competition from weeds.

Seed can also be applied in the winter. For decades, farmers have been doing “winter seeding” with their grass. Adding grass seed after the first frost, but before the snow flies, will set the seeds in preparation for next spring. The seeds will lie dormant over winter, then as soon as the ground temperature warms up in the spring, they will germinate. This process requires little to no water as the ground will be moist enough in the spring for the seeds to germinate.

**Aerating improves nutrient and water absorption**

Many grass related problems, including weed infestation, pests and wilting, result from compacted soil. If your soil has high clay content, aerating (mechanically removing a core of soil and turf) reduces soil compaction and improves the penetration of water and nutrients. It is best to aerate your lawn every other fall.

If you are in a new development where sod has been laid, annual lawn improvement is critical because the soil on which the sod was laid is most likely to be compacted with very little nutrients. In this situation, you may want to consider aerating and adding compost more frequently, up to two times per year, to help reduce this heavy compaction.

*Thatch is a common problem that can be easily solved*

Thatch is a common problem that lawns develop when a layer of dead grass builds up around the base of the living grass. It is naturally occurring and only becomes a problem when it builds up to the point of restricting water from reaching the grass roots.

Thatch build up can occur after heavy pesticide use, including fungicides. Ontario has banned the use of cosmetic pesticides. Eliminating these harsh chemicals from your lawn will help to reduce any excess thatch that has built up. If thatch is still a problem, lawn aeration will immediately reduce thatch layers.

*Fertilizer provides nitrogen needed for growing*

Lawns can be fertilized every spring or fall. Lawns require nitrogen for healthy growth. Natural fertilizers contain nitrogen that does not readily dissolve in water and is able to withstand the elements. Examples of natural fertilizers include: blood meal, dried poultry or cow manure, compost and fish emulsion. Grass clippings are another excellent natural source of nitrogen and should be left on the lawn for this purpose. Try not to fertilize your lawn more than once per year or your grass may grow faster than microorganisms can break it down, which would result in thatch.

*Small problem areas on your lawn can be easily repaired*

Lawn repair patching is a quick and simple way to resolve small areas that are brown, damaged, bare or thin. Small problem areas can be caused by pets, pests, disease, over-watering or heavy foot traffic.

Early spring is a perfect time to repair small areas. Seed can be laid anytime for patching, however, it is best to repair problem areas in the cooler weather. Try adding a small layer of compost over the seed to keep the area moist but not over-watered. If you have to repair patches in the hot and dry weather of the summer, take extra steps to keep the soil moist.



# Garden Maintenance

*Mulching provides many benefits for your garden*

Mulch can suppress weeds and reduce the amount of water your garden needs by up to 70 per cent. Organic mulches including shredded bark, chips or chopped leaves supply additional nutrients to the soil as the materials break down. Inorganic mulches such as gravel or stones can also be used to keep moisture in the soil and suppress weed growth, but they will not improve the nutrient content of the soil. A good rule of thumb is to add at least five centimetres of mulch to the top of the soil.

It is a good idea to apply mulch in the late spring when plants are small enough to work around. Periodically top up the mulch, depending on the type used and the rate at which it breaks down.

## Should I Remove Bugs From My Landscape?

Gardens, lawns and the soil they grow in are home to many living things. The majority of insects found in your landscape do not cause problems; some are even beneficial to your lawn and garden. Before you destroy a bug in your garden, make sure you know what it is. Butterfly larvae are often mistaken for harmful garden pests and wasps are often confused with our native bees. Before you remove a problem insect from your landscape, make sure that it is indeed a problem. The more diverse your landscape is with beneficial insects, the better “natural defence” your landscape will have.

Keep in mind that flowers, trees and shrubs often require insects for pollination. The world’s insect pollinators are rapidly declining, which not only threatens our gardens, but our food sources as well. Planting native plants and non-invasive, water-efficient plants that attract pollinators will help to enhance your garden, as well as support the pollinator population in general.



## Resources

### Provincial

Ministry of the Environment  
Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

[www.ene.gov.on.ca/environment](http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/environment)  
[www.omafra.gov.on.ca](http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca)

### National

Natural Resources Canada  
Environment Canada

[www.nrcan-rncan.gc.ca](http://www.nrcan-rncan.gc.ca)  
[www.ec.gc.ca](http://www.ec.gc.ca)

### International

Energy Star  
United States Environmental Protection Agency  
United Nations

[www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov)  
[www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)  
[www.un.org/en](http://www.un.org/en)

### Garden Centre Partners

Please visit the *Water for Tomorrow* website ([www.waterfortomorrow.ca](http://www.waterfortomorrow.ca)) for the current list of our Garden Centre Partners.



Era is a coated recycled paper made using 50% recycled fibre from post-consumer sources and 50% virgin fibre from FSC certified forests.

For more information, please visit  
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