Short Plant Alternatives to Typical Grass Lawns in Central Texas Hill Country

The iconic large green lawn is common in many of our large hill country landscapes even though it struggles under the relentless Central Texas sun. Water restrictions due to drought and our low Lake Travis, scorching summers, and the desire for more sustainable practices are driving us to explore alternatives. Fortunately, we have variety of native and adapted plants that can create low-maintenance and eco-friendly landscapes. This article delves into several short plant alternatives to traditional grass lawns, focusing on options great for the Central Texas hill country.

Traditional lawns, particularly those reliant on our non-native turf grasses of Bermuda, Zoysia or St. Augustine grasses, demand significant water, fertilizer, and upkeep. Let's leave these to the golf courses and playing fields! There is a high financial cost of maintaining such lawns in addition to a high resource cost. Much has been written about reducing lawn and increasing perennial beds with mulch. In fact, the LCRA has offered homeowners rebates related to reducing lawns and checking irrigation systems. But, there is a natural appeal to a large, low, green swath that appeals to most of us. And, when we use natives, we support local ecosystems, providing habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

Low-Growing Ground Covers:

- **Horseherb (Calyptocarpus vialis):**
  - A Central Texas native which is probably already in your landscape, horseherb is a champion of resilience. It thrives in shady spots, tolerates poor soil, and needs minimal supplemental watering once established.
  - Its low-growing, mat-like growth suppresses weeds and creates a natural, easy-care ground cover that never gets too high and can be mowed. It goes dormant in winter but comes back year after year after year.
  - Typically established through plugs or transplants, as seeding is less common.
- **Frogfruit (Phyla nodiflora):**
  - Also known as Texas frogfruit, this native ground cover is exceptionally drought-tolerant and loves full sun.
  - It produces small, white flowers that attract pollinators and provides sustenance for wildlife.
  - Excellent for erosion control and areas with poor drainage.
  - Most effectively established through plugs or divisions, though seed is possible, but slow.
  - It will go dormant in the winter but comes back year after year after year.
- **Meadow Sedge (Carex perdentata):**
  - This native sedge offers a grass-like appearance and can be a suitable alternative in certain conditions.
  - It does well under oaks in shade and creates a beautiful meadow feel or can be arranged in row to create a modern landscape look.
  - It can tolerate various soil types and is best suited for low-traffic areas. It can be mowed.
  - Propagation can be achieved through clump division, and also by seed.

Native Grasses for a Natural Look:

- **Buffalo Grass (Bouteloua dactyloides):**
  - A true native, buffalo grass is built for the Central Texas climate. It requires minimal watering, tolerates poor soil, and forms a soft, blue-green turf.
  - It can be mowed but it doesn't need it. Truly low maintenance.
  - Best established by sod for faster results, though seed is available, requiring more patience.
- **Blue Grama (Bouteloua gracilis):**
  - Another native gem, blue grama is exceptionally drought-tolerant and forms attractive, fine-textured bunches.
  - It provides a natural, airy look to the landscape.
  - Best established by seed, though plugs are available.
- **Curly Mesquite Grass (Hilaria belangeri):**
  - A very hardy native grass, that is extremly drought tolerant.
  - It is a warm season grass that forms a tight curly mat.
  - It is best established by seed.

Specialty Turf Blends:

- **Native Sun Turf/Thunder Turf (Native American Seed Company):**
  - Native American Seed Company offers specialized turf mixes tailored to Central Texas conditions.
  - These blends, like Native Sun Turf and Thunder Turf, combine a variety of native grasses and wildflowers that thrive in our area.
  - Thunder turf is designed for higher traffic areas than the native sun turf.
  - Established by seed you can order directly from them.

Key Considerations for Transitioning:

- **Watering During Establishment:** While these alternatives are generally drought-tolerant, they need consistent watering during the initial establishment phase.
- **Maintenance Needs:** Most alternatives require less maintenance than traditional lawns, but occasional weeding and trimming may be necessary. During the driest of seasons, supplemental watering will keep them looking their best but it is not necessary.
- **Aesthetic Preferences:** Consider the desired look. Native grasses offer a natural, meadow-like feel or can be arranged for a more modern look.
- **Sunlight and Soil Conditions:** Match the plants to your specific site conditions. Some prefer full sun, while others thrive in partial shade.
- Durability: Unfortunately none of these alternatives can handle lots of daily foot traffic but they can handle some.

Embracing a Sustainable Future:

Transitioning to lawn alternatives is a step towards a more sustainable and resilient landscape in Central Texas. It allows you to have a pleasing landscape without hurting our environment. By choosing native and adapted plants, you can create a beautiful, low-maintenance environment that conserves water, supports local ecosystems, and reduces your environmental footprint. We can all win! Embrace the diversity of Central Texas flora and create a landscape that thrives in harmony with our very unique environment.

ROCK ON !?! or Wood Stock !?!

You've gotten all your lovely plants purchased, arranged and planted. So what's next? Decide how to cover the bare soil, of course. Ground cover plants, or more often, we use a covering called mulch, the most common types being rock or wood. The growing trend is to use rock as mulch. It has a nice clean look, does not degrade over time, and there are several appealing choices. The most common are decomposed granite (aka "DG "), river rock that comes in various sizes (like one to six inches) and the trendy black/gray gravel. But, what most individuals don't know is that there are consequences that come with using rock as mulch.

For instance, when the rock mulch is in sun, it heats up the soil and, therefore, heats up the roots of the plants below it. Only certain plants can thrive with hot roots, including cactus, agave, and yucca. The hot soil also causes an increase in water needs for the plants since the soil loses moisture quicker.
Another reason people want rock mulch is because it looks "clean" and seems low maintenance. Of course, it always looks great when put down. But, several problems arise overtime that require maintenance even when you put landscape fabric under it. For instance, dust, dirt and pollen that naturally float in our air settle on top of the rock and in its crevices. Also, leaves can fall in crevices and decompose and add nutrients perfect for seed sprouting. Water flowing across the rock also deposits soil in the crevices. Overtime, the rock bed becomes a perfect planting bed for native seeds that float in the air and settle and sprout amidst the rock. It is virtually impossible to keep this natural process from occurring so maintenance becomes necessary after about year two of having rock mulch. Hand-pulling newly sprouted weeds is easy but the longer the weeds are allowed to grow, the harder it is to manage them. Some might turn to chemical control but remember that any chemical methods used in our landscapes can end up in our lakes, which we use for our drinking water. So please use chemicals wisely.

Another consideration with rock mulch is that in heavy rains, it can be washed away. The smaller the rock, the easier it washes away. So make sure you consider where the water flows when using rock mulch, using larger rock in faster flow areas.

The next question that often comes is whether to put landscape fabric under the rock or not. In most cases, it is recommended to use landscape fabric under rock, especially if the existing soil has weed seeds or weed roots that will grow up through the rock. You can also use cardboard under the rock or under the fabric because it prevents weeds from coming up through the rock and stops the most tenacious of weeds. Cardboard also decomposes within a few years and helps create healthy soil.
The most common type of mulch is, of course, wood mulch. It accomplishes four major things. It's esthetically pleasing like rock mulch. Wood mulch decomposes to help create healthy soil. Wood mulch reduces water usage by up to 25%. Wood mulch also deters weeds, like rock mulch, and an inch or more (but no more than six inches) suppresses more weeds the thicker it is.. And for all these reasons, wood mulch is often a very good choice. And, if you really want to boost the health of your soil so that your plants really thrive, consider using "living" mulch, which contains so many goodies to promote soil and plant health.

Drawbacks of wood mulch include that it needs to be replenished. It naturally decomposes to create nutrients for the soil and microbes so it needs to be reapplied. Overtime if regularly reapplied, it will need to be replenished less often as it builds a nice mat on the soil. Blowers used on mulch beds blow away the smaller, decomposed particles and therefore remove the best nutrients and cause the need to add more mulch more often. Wood mulch also can wash away in areas of high water flow.

So, rock on or wood stock–your choice! And have fun!