



SSAFE CASE STUDY REPORT

Low-Mow Grass

Senior Living Community: Kendal at Oberlin

Location: Oberlin, Ohio

Keywords: Low-Mow grass; turf replacement; environmental sustainability

Summary: In a survey leading to its 2018 Master Landscape Plan, the majority of Kendal at Oberlin residents supported converting at least some of its 30 acres of “manicured lawns and landscape beds” to a “Nature Preserve.” Environmental sustainability was clearly a driver for many residents, to reduce greenhouse gas and particulate emissions from the gas-powered mowers and the noise pollution and labor costs as well. We ran a successful trial of replacing a small area of lawn with Low-Mow grass.

Objective: The project goals were to increase the amount of “Nature Preserve” on the Kendal campus, to reduce the use of gas-powered lawn mowers, and to reduce staff time devoted to lawn care.

Project Description: In 2018, one Kendal resident, with support from several other members of the Horticulture Committee, proposed seeding a trial plot of Low-Mow grass, a mixture of four or five fescue grasses that would need mowing only once or twice a year.

Methodology: The pilot site was a difficult-to-manage area seen by most residents on a daily basis. Moreover, it had two ongoing problems. Salt-laden snow had been piled on the plot for more than 20 years; in fact, the salt content of the soil was so high that only a few plants, mostly weeds, grew there, which were unattractive and a nuisance to mow. Two successive plantings of native flowers and forbs had failed.

Two “fixes” helped with the salt problem: a French drain was buried along the edge of the road to drain the salty water away, and new soil was brought in and graded to create a berm to control future deposits of most of the plowed snow. The new soil, in addition to having no salt, had no weeds or weed seed, helping with the second problem: an accumulated “seed bank” in the soil. In the area not covered by the new soil, we applied the herbicide Roundup.



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Resident volunteers planted the fescue seed in August, 2018. Maintenance during 2019 and 2020 required watering, more Roundup, and some hand weeding. We mowed the plots as seed heads matured. With a good sod established, in 2021 and 2022, we used only a string trimmer to remove seed heads above the 6” to 10” tall grass, which satisfies the aesthetic requirements of most residents.

The only mowing, with residue removed, in these later years is in early December. Once established, the fescue sod seems quite resistant to invasion from new weeds and, in fact, was the only lawn on the Kendal campus not sprayed for dandelions in 2022.

Funding Needed: Administration covered the cost of a French drain, new soil, seed and Roundup. All labor was done by resident volunteers.

Involvement or Support of Community Administration: The trial had the support of Kendal Administration and, especially Grounds Staff, with the prospect of less of their attention needed over time. The project received oversight from a “Turf Conversion Group” within Kendal’s Arboretum Committee, which includes both residents and Grounds staff.

Key Challenges: Most residents are getting used to the “wavy” or “shaggy” appearance in summer and even prefer the somewhat heavier winter cover to that of other mowed lawns.

Outcome: The first planting has shown enough promise that two additional areas have been seeded to the same Low-Mow grass mixture. With more attention to cleaning the areas of weeds and weed seed, they promise less attention to getting established than the original planting. Thus, the project was a success.

Lessons Learned: We would have been better served if we had paid more attention to getting the residents “on board” before starting the project and if we had been even more careful about ensuring that the soil was weed and weed seed free before seeding the fescue mixture.



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Photos:

“Here are a couple shots of the Center Pond (south side) planting of No-Mow (aka low-mow) grass in its third year, taken in June 2021. It looks a little more tidy now with the recommended once a year mowing (at about Thanksgiving) and seed head knock down in late June.” Photos and summary submitted by Don Parker, Kendal at Oberlin.

