**Calvin Finch Ph.D.**

**Horticulturist and Director**

**Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center**

**“Too Shady for Lawn Grass”**

A landscape with trees is an advantage when it comes to air conditioning costs and landscape watering, but it is not easy to grow a thick lawn in the shade.

St. Augustine grass has the most shade tolerance, but even it requires four or five hours of sun to perform well. Zoysia grass requires more sun than St. Augustine and Bermuda while buffalo grass requires full sun to do well.

Other options to consider include leaving a deep shaded area in a natural state. A few grasses and weeds will grow but usually not to the extent that they need to be mowed.

More formal options include use of shade-tolerant groundcovers. Asiatic jasmine, dwarf ruellia, liriope and monkey grass can be used to good effect. Drift or layers of the groundcovers maintained at different heights are especially attractive. Taller shade-tolerant plants like Turk’s cap and shrimp plant can also be used in the layered look and will provide blooms.

Texas gold columbine is also shade tolerant. It is especially desirable under deciduous trees. The foliage resembles maidenhair fern and is very attractive in the fall, winter and spring. In March, the plant sends up bloom stalks that carry half-dollar size yellow blooms that resemble shooting stars.

Mulch spread under the trees can also be attractive and does not require watering and only minimum maintenance.

Include some hardscape such as flagstone, brick or patio blocks without mortar with the mulch or groundcover and you will have excellent areas for outdoor activities. SAWS customers can visit their website, [www.saws.org](http://www.saws.org), to check out the particulars of a coupon offered for replacement of lawn grass with hardscape.

A native grass seed mix, “Habiturf,” is on the market. It includes three main grasses: buffalo grass, blue grama and curly mesquite.

The seed mix could be useful for your landscape if you have full sun and are willing to grow it like a groundcover. None of the grass varieties in the mix make a tight sod or have shade tolerance.

Buffalo grass prefers heavy soils and does well on slopes in full sun in our area if it is allowed to grow to 6 inches tall. Buffalo grass does not make a tight sod. If it is mowed low, irrigated or fertilized, you can expect weeds to move in.

Based on my experience with buffalo grass, I would be wary of claims that a mix dominated by buffalo grass can tolerate up to 50 percent shade and will make a tight sod if mowed at 2 inches tall.

Blue grama cultural requirements are very similar to buffalo grass. Again, it looks and performs best in sunny locations without excessive fertilizer or irrigation. It is described as a clump grass that is even more drought tolerant than buffalo grass. Based on the literature, blue grama does a better job of growing in sand than buffalo grass does.

Curly mesquite may be the densest of the three drought-tolerant grasses in this mix but it is also described as coarse. It prefers well-drained heavy soils.

Plant “Habiturf” when the soil and the air temperatures are warm. That is usually between April 15 and Sept. 30. Experiment with a section before you invest the work and money in using it for your entire lawn.