

SCENIC ROOTS

Hay
Scented Fern
is an attractive
ground
cover.

Naturalize Your Septic Bed *Grass is not mandated but what are the alternatives?*

Story and photos by Rick Snider

For those of us who enjoy landscaping, winter is an ideal season for planning our spring and summer projects. One winter planning project which is gaining appeal among country gardeners, involves naturalizing the septic bed.

Even the novice landscaper knows the noose is tightening on the use of pesticides on lawns. More power lawnmowers, which use valuable energy and spew out Greenhouse gases, are collecting dust in the garage, and we now find front gardens with a diversity of flowers, shrubs, and ground covers, where monocultures of grass once prevailed. Replacing a lawn is a straightforward process except, however, when it comes to one of its most traditional uses – ground cover on septic tile beds.

Little information exists out there about alternative plants for leaching beds and there is a natural reluctance to tamper with a functioning system when a wrong decision can result in costly repairs. But a little common sense and plant knowledge should build confidence that the septic bed is not hands-off, and many garden possibilities exist.

The first step is to become familiar with your system. Locate the tank and tile bed. Raw sewage enters the septic tank where bacteria break down solids that either dissolve in the liquid or settle out as sludge.

Sludge remains in the tank until pumped out. The solution of dissolved solids, called effluent, flows out of the septic tank into the tile bed or leaching bed, and spreads out in a network of perforated pipes, the weeping tiles. The effluent then seeps through the holes in the pipes down into the soil. If the pipes become blocked for any reason, the effluent level will rise and find other outlets, and if it reaches the surface, foul odours result. Each homeowner must ensure that the weeping tiles are protected from physical damage, free from roots, and that the soil cover does not erode away.

Usually contractors sow grass seed on the tile bed to form a quick and easy ground cover. A pamphlet issued by the North Bay–Mattawa Conservation Authority, the agency overseeing our Sewage Systems, states: “Grow grass or other shallow rooted vegetation on top of your leaching bed to prevent erosion”. So the door is open for alternatives. Plants with deep root systems, trees, shrubs, and some ground covers such as Periwinkle, are eliminated. But flowerbeds of annual garden flowers, which grow from seed or from bulbs each year, should be fine, because with only one growing season the roots are small.

More caution should be exercised with perennials. The roots of perennials survive from year to year and can get thick and deep. Information on the root systems of perennials is not readily available so it may be necessary to find an already

established plant to investigate, along with a willing owner, then do the spade test. Drive a spade into the ground at the base of a plant and then tilt it just enough to see whether thicker deeper roots have developed. Do the spade test on the existing grass mat to use as a basis for comparison. It is not the density of the root mass but the thickness of larger roots and their depth that matters. Surprisingly, some of our taller native plants like Goldenrods and Asters, are perfectly acceptable. Daisies and Brown-Eyed Susans should be okay. Milkweeds, however, have a deeper creeping rhizome and are not advisable atop tile beds.

It is not necessary to remove all the existing grass. The easiest thing to do is to create a wildflower meadow. Just let the grass grow. Most lawns contain a mixture of grass types and these will differ in height and size when allowed to grow to maturity. Some are very attractive. For a quick start, scatter seeds of one of the many wildflower mixes available on the market. Many native wildflowers, such as Violets, will volunteer, appearing naturally over time in barer areas, their flowers providing colour in the spring and their leaves food for the caterpillars of the Fritillary butterflies. Add lots of clover seed. Orange Hawkweed likes sun and is spectacular in June. Or, if the magnitude of the project scares you, just change a portion of the lawn at first, to see how you like it. It’s all right to keep a patch of lawn maintained with a hand mower. But the appeal of meadows can grow on you, and what may at first look unkempt, will eventually begin to look organized and attractive, and have purpose, especially when colourful birds, dragonflies, and butterflies visit the flowers.

A little watering shouldn’t hurt but don’t use a sprinkler to soak the ground. Watering a septic bed is not recommended in case the ground gets saturated and effluent reaches the surface. It should not be needed anyway because of the proximity of fluid to the surface. It’s like having a built-in high water table. It does not seem wise to use wetland plants like Cardinal Flower, whose roots are used to being wet, since they may naturally grow deeper into the tiles. One of the strengths of native wildflowers in general is that they are adapted to our weather and do not need to be watered.

Unfortunately, freedom from the lawn mower does not mean freedom from work. It is necessary to pull out by hand any shrub or tree seedlings that will appear from time to time as they would in any garden. Vines and brambles should be removed. Any plant with a woody stem that will live from year to year should be pulled out.

Ferns are a good alternative to grass. They are perennials but have shallow root systems and can serve as a ground cover or be

Both Daisy and Daisy Fleabane with a fern background, early summer.

❁ WINTER 2007 EDITION

~26~

Painted Lady butterfly on Red Clover in June.

Sideroads of Parry Sound & Area ❁