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This is an unmowed Eco-Lawn, a blend of seven fine fescues. Proven blends of fine-fescue grasses require little or no mowing, scorn fertilizers, defy drought, thrive in the shade and remain a healthy-looking green through the entire growing season.

Fescue to the rescue? Could be for a hardy, low-maintenance lawn

By Dean Fosdick
The Associated Press

Lawn lovers looking to do less yard work might consider converting to fine-fescue grass.

Proven blends require little or no mowing, scorn fertilizers, defy drought, thrive in shade, remain green through the growing season and provide a comforting cushion for bare feet.

"This is not the result of developing a new hybrid. It's done by using different combinations of native grasses," said Neil Diboll, a landscape designer and president of Prairie Nursery in Westfield, Wis., who began marketing an assortment of six no-mow fescues about 10 years ago.

"It's a bit more expensive than your typical lawn seed, but you'll save in the long run through less maintenance and upkeep," Diboll said.

"It's great in sand and rocky soils and it's a low-nutrient feeder. The best way to kill a fescue lawn is to fertilize it."

Early fall is the optimum time to give your lawn a face-lift. Concentrate on soil preparation if you're using fescues, though, because they don't compete well with weeds, which grow much faster.

"Eliminate all the existing vegetation on the site to eliminate competition before you put any seed down," Diboll said.

"Otherwise, it's the same planting method as for any other turf. Rake the area, scatter the new seed and then water it. It's better just to drop seed onto the dead grass, the stuff you've killed, than till up the ground, which also brings up the weeds."

Word is getting around about these natural-looking, low-maintenance turf grasses, said Miriam Goldberger, co-owner of

Wildflower Farm in Coldwater, Ontario, where she helped develop a fine-fescue mix, "Eco-Lawn."

"A combination of factors has caused the awakening," she said. "More and more people are uncomfortable about using chemicals. Many are tired of all the time it takes to mow lawns."

Yet fine fescues aren't for everyone. They dislike damp soils, such as heavy clay. Fine fescues don't care much for heavy traffic, either.

"If you've got three kids and two dogs, don't buy it," said Bill Sloey, a retired botany professor.

A tolerance for shade and poor soil also makes it a good choice for stabilizing eroding hillsides and banks.

"Lots of people use these blends at second homes, where they'd rather fire up their grills when they arrive than their lawn mowers," Diboll said.

A mower that does the work for you? Sounds too good to be true

By Staci Dennis
Correspondent

NORFOLK

Forget pushing the mower in summer's swelter. Now there's a robot to tend the lawn.

No, the Jetsons haven't moved to town, but LawnBott has made its home at Land & Coates in Norfolk. Better yet, the tiny-tech creature wants to make itself at home on lawns across Hampton Roads.

Think of it like a Roomba for your fescue.

Land & Coates, which has five local stores, signed on to be a dealer of the LawnBott, a small lawn mower robot that is smart enough to cut a half-acre lawn without plowing over flower beds. The product is manufactured by Kyoda America Industries.

"We wanted to better embrace the green movement," said Barden Winstead, co-owner and general manager at Land & Coates. "The product works well and fits into our line of high-quality merchandise."

If you've finally taken to the idea of a robot cleaning your home's floors, i.e. Roomba and Scooba, consider that LawnBott and similar mowers (such as Robomower) do the same for lawns — hands-free cutting.

LawnBott comes in a va-



riety of sizes and capability levels. The zero-emissions machine mulches the cut grass to help fertilize the yard, can dock itself when the battery runs low and will automatically cut the lawn when programmed to do so.

In addition, it has a personal security code and alarm to prevent theft. It also reduces noise pollution compared to typical lawn-care equipment.

But robotic mowing doesn't come cheaply.

The smaller LawnBott models start at \$1,399, while the more sophisticated, larger models start at \$2,299 and go up to \$3,999.

That might sound like a lot for a space-aged lawn mower, but for Todd Winstead, co-owner of Land & Coates,

the price is offset by savings in time and money. The unit will run about four hours on a fully charged battery. It takes about three hours to recharge and costs about \$10 a year in electricity.

"You don't have to plan time to mow your lawn in the heat or around family outings," Winstead said. "This frees up your time, which is something everyone wants and needs."

LawnBott recognizes when it rains and will not leave its docking station until weather permits. It even has the capability to work on slopes of 27 degrees.

A keypad controller lets owners set up cutting times and frequency, which means scheduling around times when children or pets aren't using the yard. However, if there are people, pets or obstacles in the yard, LawnBott will sense it and steer clear. It also has an automatic shut-off safety feature.

LawnBott has been widely used in Europe for almost 10 years. According to the company website, more than 300,000 of the robots are in use today.

For more information about LawnBott, go to www.lawnbott.com, visit Land & Coates at 830 Popular Hall Drive, Norfolk, or call, 461-5800.

Staci Dennis, sdennis@cox.net

