

Giving up on having the “perfect lawn” might not be such a bad idea.

Transitioning away from a traditional lawn “and thus traditional pesticides” could be a health decision. It could be an environmental decision to reduce unnecessary water waste. Or, simply, the decision to transition to a natural lawn could be fueled by the desire to never have to push a mower around the yard again. On a per acre basis, American homeowners use 10 times more pesticides on their lawns than U.S. farmers use on their farms, according to the Pesticide Action Network. This translates to 80 million pounds of synthetic pesticides used by U.S. homeowners annually “all in the name of lawn cosmetics. And some pesticides can present significant environmental and health dangers, especially for animals and children. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control conducted a study of 9,282 people nationwide and found pesticides in 100% of people who had both blood and urine tested. In this study, the CDC tested for 23 possible pesticides, and the average person carried 13 of them. Aside from the dangers of pesticides, lawns consume 9 billion gallons of fresh water every day in the U.S., according to Curiosity Stream, and 200 million gallons of gas every year, according to the NRDC. Tulsan Anne Tarbel, a Tulsa County Master Gardener, finally made the switch to a natural space two years ago. “(Her partner) finally sold his mower, and we got to work,” Tarbel said with a laugh. “Of course, lawns have a purpose, but it just wasn’t the environmentally friendly thing we wanted to do anymore.” Tarbel advises to begin with a vision. For example, she knew she wanted an asymmetric design with a stone pathway and Oklahoma native plant species. Arbuckle gaillardia, coneflowers, corabelles and various herbs are among the species that grace her garden. “Start with a list of wants, whether that be color or vegetables or attracting butterflies!” you can call the Tulsa Master Gardeners for help,” Tarbel said. The Tulsa County Master Gardeners are a program of the OSU Extension Service and they offer community programs as well as a phone line to help citizens learn to cultivate

their gardens. Tarbel used their soil testing program to learn which nutrients her garden needs, and she composts to bolster growth. “There’s something nurturing about watching flowers bloom. I never just came outside to watch my grass grow,” Tarbel joked. Just outside of downtown Tulsa in a neighborhood formerly known as Brady Heights, a handful of homes have adapted the natural lawn philosophy. Some homeowners have planted free-blooming wild flowers, creating a thicket of natural grasses and buzzing bees. Others have planted gardens, brimming with tomato, bell pepper and cucumber plants. Anna Veronesi moved into her home in 1997 and got to work creating her “outdoor room.” “I enjoy relating to the yard. It’s kind of wild, and it gets out of hand sometimes, but it’s always changing. It’s alive in that way, and I get to care for it,” Veronesi said. Veronesi’s philosophy is one of easy-going acquiescence; she can place plants and orchestrate arrangements but ultimately the plants will grow where they want to grow, and she’ll roll with the punches. She suggests beginning with your parameters; know the boundaries of the space you’re working with, and fill it in like a coloring book or DIY mosaic with your favorite plants. For people considering the switch, Veronesi suggests planting perennials. “It’s because I’m lazy,” she laughed, explaining that they come back every year so there’s no need to replant. Peonies, rudbeckia, hostas, ferns and variegated artemisia all sit cozy in her front yard, and sedums offer a lovely ground cover. “And it’s a good reason to talk to your neighbors. Our neighborhood association has done plant exchanges before,” she explained. Veronesi said she has knocked on front doors to trade daisies for echinacea, and she’s gotten to know people while doing it. “It’s all work. If you have a lawn, you have to mow it. But I don’t think of this as work, really. I relate to it,” Veronesi said. However, there are ways to keep the lawn look, but make environmentally aware changes to your maintenance routine. David Hillock, OSU Extension consumer horticulturist, said that while he has reduced his lawn space in order to include ornamental plants, traditional lawns still

offer benefits, such as erosion control and providing a recreational space for pets or children. The key, he explained, is learning to resolve lawn issues without unnecessary chemicals or overwatering. "Should we reduce the area in our landscapes dedicated to the traditional, high maintenance lawn? Probably. Should we get rid of every square inch of lawns across the country? Absolutely not," Hillock said. "I am all about assessing the site/situation and choosing the best plant species and the best or appropriate methods and means to keep them happy and thriving." Whether you're flirting with the idea of a lawn overhaul or simply looking to designate a corner of the lawn to a home garden, today is a great day to start. Featured video: