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Clover lawns: Colorado expert shares pros, cons on recent trend

By KELLY HAYES kelly.hayes@gazette.com
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In Colorado, the most common clover used for lawns is white clover, a leafy green with white flowers, said Colorado State University professor Tony Koski, a turfgrass scientist.

Courtesy photo by Tony Koski

If you've been looking to change up your lawn for spring, you've probably come across the increasingly popular option to grow clover.

The soft, green leaves of clover are appealing to some who are tired of all the potential chemicals used to upkeep a grass lawn.

But would a clover lawn hold up in Colorado?

Colorado State University professor Tony Koski, a turfgrass scientist, explained the pros and cons of having a clover lawn.

In Colorado, the most common clover used for lawns is white clover, a leafy green with white flowers.

"There are quite a few different kinds of clover but really only one you would use for a lawn," Koski said.

The use of clover for lawns isn't new, Koski said. Despite recent interest in the plant, it used to be common to mix clover with grass in yards, before herbicides hit the market.

“Back in the ‘30s, ‘40s, ‘50s, it was intentionally included in lawn seed mixes,” Koski said. “Once herbicides became available, people wanted more grass in their lawns, and less things that some might construe as weedy in appearance, so the whole clover thing kind of went away.”

Why was clover often used before herbicides? Well, it provides several benefits to lawns.

Clover is a legume, Koski said, and legumes have bacteria in their roots that draw nitrogen from the surrounding environment. That nitrogen helps the whole yard and acts as a fertilizer, improving surrounding grass and flowers.

“Before there were commercial fertilizers, that was a way of fertilizing your lawn, essentially, is to have some clover mixed in with it,” Koski said. “They use that nitrogen for their own growth, but then some of that nitrogen leaks out of the roots of the clover. It can be shared with other plants growing around it.”

In Colorado, you can try mixing clover seeds with wildflower seeds for a blooming flower garden. And since white clover flowers throughout the season, pollinators will flock to your garden, Koski said.

“Its a more constant supply of flowers potentially for bees and native pollinators, so that’s one of the advantages of clover in the lawn,” Koski said.

The length of clover varies depending on the seed, with standard clover growing to about 6-7 inches tall, and micro clover reaching about 4-6 inches.

“The idea with those micro clovers is that they grow kind of under the grass canopy,” Koski said. “They are very theoretically low growing and they tend not to flower as much.”

As far as cons of a clover lawn, perhaps the biggest is that it likely doesn’t save that much water, an important factor to consider in drought-prone areas like Colorado. More research is still needed to find out just how much water clover needs to be successful, Koski said.

“Nobody really knows. There’s all these claims that clover requires way less water than a bluegrass lawn. I strongly suspect that’s not true,” Koski said. “What I’ve seen with clover in 35 years of my job of looking at lawns and working on lawns — I don’t think it’s going to be the panacea from a water perspective that a lot of people think.”

In fact, later this year, Koski will perform a research demonstration at the Larimer County Fairgrounds to see just how much water a clover lawn uses.

The good news, however, is that the plant will tell you when it is in need of water.

“It’ll tell you in a very striking fashion that it needs to be watered,” Koski said. “It’s gonna start wilting and turning brown and yellow and different colors, so that’ll kind of be it saying that you really should water it.”

Another con: weeds. It’s harder to kill weeds without killer clover.

“If you get plants growing in your clover lawn that you don’t like, it gets really hard to control them with any kind of herbicide because what kills the weed would probably kill your clover,” Koski said.

If you’re interested in growing clover, Koski recommends you start by integrating the clover seeds with your current grass.

“You can kill off your entire lawn and then seed clover into it. What I encourage people to do is not to do that, because if you’re not happy with the clover, if it doesn’t come up then you’re gonna have a weed problem,” Koski said.

At the end of the day, different lawns will have different needs, Koski said. So, if you want to try it, go ahead — it’s nothing new. “This has actually been around forever, as it has a place. If you learn how to grow right, you can have a nice clover lawn,” he said.

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