

## **Green, Green Grass**

*Is it a symbol of prosperity, an eco-nightmare, a booming industry or our cultural obsession?*

The history, costs and psychology of lawns, plus some xeriscaping and native garden links.

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By Daniel Wood

Consider the North American lawn as an offering to God, and everything else makes sense. The annual fattening of the sacred cow with fertilizer. The herbicidal genuflections before crabgrass. The summer libations of holy water. The virginal sacrifice: the lawn cut in its prime as the homeowner offers a prayer for eternal greenness. Then the grass, its spiritual purpose served, is sent dumpward... until next Saturday's ceremonial repetition of this ritual.

But looked at from a very different vantage point, as a growing number of environmentally concerned people do, the lawn is a wasteful, polluting, conformist, ridiculously time-consuming and increasingly anachronistic effort to dominate nature - whatever the cost or consequences. This is my own reluctantly acquired view. I mean, how is it that North Americans spend more on grass than the entire world spends on foreign aid? How is it that during the continent's increasingly dry summers, over 60 percent of drinking water goes to quenching the thirst of fundamentally decorative turf? How is it that the typical North American homeowner spends 150 hours on lawn care annually and 35 hours on sex?

I come to this apostasy as a man whose lawn worship spans decades. I've revelled in the Zen-like repetition of straight, overlapping mown rows. The distance I've walked behind a mower would put me in good standing with the powerful cultural forces (and corporations) that deem 3.5-centimetre-long emerald lawns the only permissible setting for a house. I've clipped and edged within a nano-fraction of bliss. I've lain on my velvety carpet in the evening and thought Big Thoughts. Not once did I consider how it came to be that millions of North American lawns were

facing the same meticulous grooming, the same incantations that no alien invaders intrude on this idyllic 2,4-D-defended Eden.

Credit for our collective lawn obsession goes to Frances Louis XIV, who first demonstrated with his little 17th-century project at Versailles that prestige would befall the man who could control nature's wantonness.

Lords across Europe went a-leapin' to duplicate the Sun King's acres of shaved Tapis Vert (green carpet lawns). That these lawns were conspicuously useless - they replaced baronial meadows that had previously sustained sheep - further enhanced their value to the gentry. Mown grass stood as demonstrable proof of the superiority the aristocracy felt toward those who toiled amid vulgar, proletarian dirt.

In time, however, revolutions laid these presumptions low. Lawns helped democratize conspicuous consumption. It wasn't long before North American landscapers could be heard touting, "Nothing spells class like a good stand of grass." And millions bought the sales pitch: aerators, fertilizers, spreaders, hoses, sprinklers, watering systems, mowers, pesticides, herbicides, edgers, weed whackers, rakes, composters, lawn gnomes and all.

For several decades in the mid-20th century, pop psychologists sought the basis of this suburban obsession. The lawn as therapy? The lawn as male one-upmanship? The lawn as proof of belonging? The lawn as pet? Unlike Europeans, who never succumbed to the lure, North Americans found in lawns a marriage of their continent's twin egalitarian illusions: the rustic frontier (grass) conquered by civilizing utopianism (mowing). Lawns, like Disneyland, became an expression of the continent's idealistic soul.

By the end of the 20th century, North America's mown grass - from yards to cemeteries to highway medians - came to cover 300,000 square kilometres of land, an area twice the size of New England. And the cost? Well, ka-ching doesn't quite ring loud enough. In tools, water, fertilizers and upkeep, an individual homeowner - discounting his monotonous free labour - averages \$250 per year for lawn care. The lawn care cost per year for one municipal playing field averages \$2,800. In North America, there are 750,000 of these. There are 14,500 golf courses. There are over 100,000 ferociously green corporate lawns. Each year, 60 million kilograms of pesticides hit this grass. Each summer day, 1.5 trillion litres of municipal water hits this grass too. North Americans spend an estimated \$100-billion annually on lawns. **In value, grass is, by far, the most important agricultural crop on the continent.**

What I find curious is that of the five most popular species of lawn grasses grown in North America, none have their origins here. Like the concept of the lawn itself, most of this continent's turf, like bluegrass and fescue, comes from European seed

stock. This means that unlike local flora, which is naturally adapted to conditions here, tens of millions of North American lawn lovers must maintain a never-ending war on nature, defending their vulnerable turf against the adverse effects of this continent's climate, insects and weeds. That this battle is unwinnable is never acknowledged by the profitable corporations.

Satire is always a bad omen for the comfortable; it's a precursor of change. In 1982, the Dull Men's Club and their Toro! Toro! Toro! Precision Power Mower Drill Team parodied this conformist lawn ethic during the Rose Bowl parade with dozens of mower-pushing men mimicking the intricate, synchronized routines of American marching bands. A few years later, author Stephen King turned his vengeful lawn mowers against their human masters in *Maximum Overdrive*. It wasn't just the appearance of AstroTurf or pink plastic flamingos or the sales pitch for the very real self-guided MowBot lawn mower that encouraged ridicule; it was the growing awareness that in this war against nature, the environment was losing. Agent Orange, so effective as a herbicide on Vietnamese jungle in the 1960s, was transformed into a kinder, gentler formula for weeds like dandelions. Pesticides did an effective job on insects and worms and the myriad microscopic creatures that inhabit the soil. The collateral damage from these continent-wide applications killed millions of birds and butterflies. To rejuvenate the newly sterilized soil, chemical fertilizers were required. And this was in those last green and carefree days prior to widespread summer droughts and rising fuel (and petrochemical) costs - before the public realized global warming was not some crazy David Suzuki invention.

**The time will come when the North American lawn, especially the decorative front lawn, will follow smokers and the SUV culture into the sunset. Nevada now offers a \$1,000 incentive for homeowners to remove their grass.** Eighty cities in North America have banned the use of lawn pesticides. Increasingly, highway medians and sections of public parks are being allowed to go to seed. Class action suits have overturned civic bylaws on lawn uniformity. Continent-wide, a shift to planting native ground cover is underway. (In my Kitsilano neighbourhood in Vancouver, one-third of all grassy front lawns are now gone.) Something special will, of course, be lost with the decline of lawns. People will recall, as I do, the brainless satisfaction of following the chugging power mower on its circuit of the yard. The perfection of the rows. The smell. The edged boundaries. The childhood delight of leaping the sprinkler.

That innocent time is passing. Financial and environmental pressures will make this happen. So will the inducements of the hammock. As someone wise once wrote a long, long time ago: "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind."

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## Don't Landscape, Xeriscape!

Ditching your lawn for a yard that needs no added water is the newest trend. Here are some tips.

~~> Remove front yard grass and replant with native vegetation. (Watering isn't necessary since these plants are adapted to the local climate.) With native bushes, wild grasses, ground cover and trees, the birds and butterflies will, in time, return.

~~> Reduce backyard grass through the planting of a vegetable/cutting garden of species suited to your bioregion. Sure, this will initially cost money, but you'll soon recoup your investment after losing the polluting gas mower, poisonous lawn fertilizers and pesticides (especially as water, gas and petrochemical prices soar).

~~> Follow the natural gardening movement: Start with The Wild Ones native lawns ([www.for-wild.org](http://www.for-wild.org)), the Evergreen in-school gardening program ([www.evergreen.ca](http://www.evergreen.ca)) and How to Get Your Lawn Off Grass by B.C.'s Carole Rubin (Harbour).

~~> Eat your words by growing edible, organic landscaping, like Los Angeles-area clients of HayGround Gardening do ([www.haygroundgardening.com](http://www.haygroundgardening.com)).

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